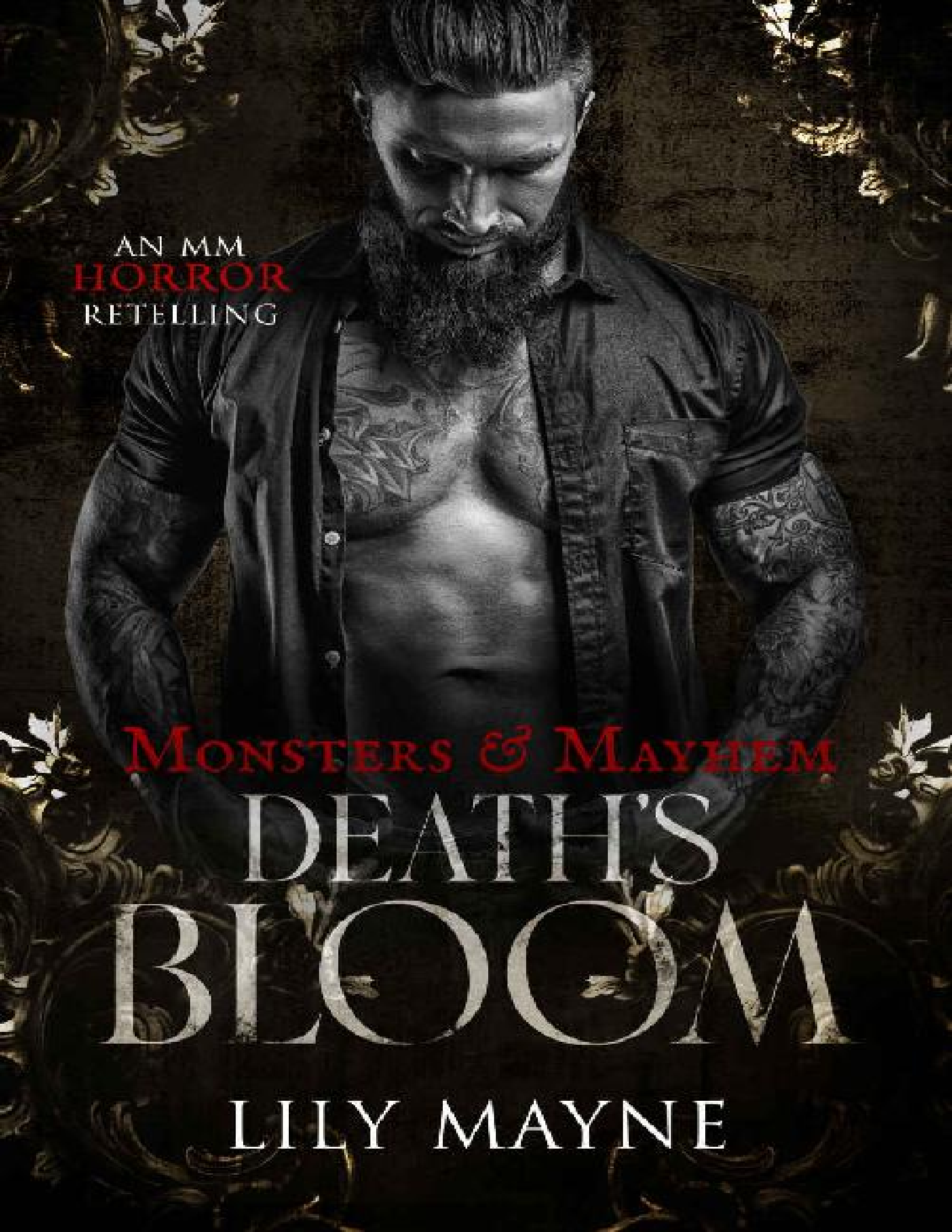
AN MM
HORROR
RETELLING
Monsters & Mayhem
DEATH'S
BLOOM
LILY MAYNE

DEATH'S BLOOM

AN MM BLUEBEARD RETELLING

MONSTERS & MAYHEM

LILY MAYNE

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Beta-reading and editing by Kate Wood Proofreading

Cover Designed by Natasha Snow Designs

www.natashasnowdesigns.com

Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It includes mild BDSM, including restraint and breath play, and MMM elements as well as graphic depictions of death, gore and violence, a somewhat toxic relationship and morally reprehensible characters.*

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CHAPTER

ONE

He was back again.

I tried not to stare as I carefully snipped the stems of the Young Lycidas roses for the bouquet I was working on, their heady fragrance filling my nose. But my gaze still kept darting back up every few seconds to the coffee shop directly across the street from Inaya's Blooms.

He's just hard to miss, I told myself obstinately, *because of the beard. You're not being a creep by immediately noticing him as soon as he appears. You're not*.

I mean, I wasn't wrong. The cobalt blue beard *did* make him stand out every single time he went into Holy Grind. So did the piercings. And his height. And the long, dark hair, always tied back in a messy knot.

And the fact that he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen.

He never appeared in Holy Grind when I was in there, which was every single morning before I started work. I refused to acknowledge that my bank balance had taken a decent hit since I'd started buying coffee every morning instead of just making it at home before leaving for work—because then I'd have to acknowledge that I was going in there every day *hoping* he'd show up earlier than normal.

Hoping I'd be able to… I didn't even know. I didn't think I'd be brave enough to just strike up a conversation with the handsome, brooding giant of a man with a blue beard and endless dark eyes.

Sometimes, after getting his coffee, he'd sit at one of the quaint metal tables outside and smoke a cigarette while frowning down at his phone. I'd find every excuse in the book to hover near the front of the shop on the days

he did that, furtively staring at him while pretending to rearrange the buckets of roses near the shop entrance.

His skin was tanned, and on sunny days, his piercings would catch the light and wink as he sat outside. He had a ring through each nostril, another in the centre of his lower lip, a bar in his left eyebrow, and I was pretty sure I'd seen a flash of metal on his tongue when he lifted his takeaway coffee cup to his mouth.

There were tattoos on his hands, down the backs of each long finger. I wondered if he had others on his body, and my gaze often drifted distractedly to the rounded biceps under his jacket. The wide, defined outline of his shoulders. He wasn't bulky or overly jacked, but his thighs were thick, and instead of hard, chiselled abs, I could see a hint of softness at his middle whenever he leaned back in his seat, which always had me biting down hard on my inner cheek. He was pretty much my ideal sexual fantasy—looks-wise, at least—brought to life, which meant my weird little obsessive attraction grew stronger every time I saw him.

It didn't help that he seemed to watch me back sometimes either, and I only knew that because my gaze was drawn to him like a magnet the moment I caught a flash of electric blue hair from the corner of my eye. But yeah—a few times, I'd glanced over and caught his dark eyes fixed on me.

It could easily have just been him people-watching. I people-watched too. It could've been because sometimes I wore clothes that people had decided were only allowed on women's bodies. Or maybe he really liked flowers. Maybe he had a partner he wanted to buy flowers for and he was planning on coming in.

Except I'd been noticing him going into Holy Grind for a while now, and he hadn't once come in to buy flowers. Nor had I ever seen him with another person.

My gut fizzed with excitement when Bluebeard—as I'd nicknamed him in my head—emerged from the coffee shop and pulled out a metal chair at a free table outside. Today he was wearing boots and jeans, and a simple grey shirt under a leather jacket.

I often wondered what he did for a living. He sometimes wore suits, and I had absolutely no chance of pretending I wasn't ogling him in a daze when he did. Fuck, I'd practically started drooling the first time he strode into Holy Grind in a dark grey three-piece suit, his tie the exact same shade

as his cobalt beard, his long dark hair tied back in its usual bun but still messy, strands falling free and framing his face.

He hadn't stayed at the coffee shop that day, but as he'd stepped back outside after getting his drink, I'd frozen in place clutching a huge bunch of pink, white and purple larkspur, just staring at him. He was *ridiculously* handsome. The punky edginess of his face, with its piercings and vibrant beard, somehow melded seamlessly with the crisp, refined three-piece suit, creating the image of something… almost mystical. Like he was some rare, beautiful bird that you'd only get to see once in your life, from a distance, not someone you'd ever actually get to know. Like one of those people you saw on the street and thought, 'Who gets to be your friend? Who have you decided is worthy?'

That first day I'd seen him in a suit, we'd locked eyes for a few seconds. His pierced brow had twitched as he lifted his coffee cup to his lips with a tattooed hand, before he strode off and disappeared from sight. My face had gone bright red, skin getting hot with humiliation at being caught staring at him like an enamoured little child. So I was trying to keep it subtle as I watched him settle at the table and lean back in his seat, thick thighs spread in a domineering pose. His dark eyes were fixed on his phone as he took a sip of coffee before setting the cup on the table. After a few seconds, he pocketed his phone and pulled out a pack of smokes and a lighter.

My nose wrinkled automatically as he pulled a cigarette free, even though I was already pretty confident that his smoking habit wouldn't put me off in the slightest if I *actually* had a shot with him. The tip flared orange-red as he lit it, the satisfaction clear on his features when he exhaled after his first long drag.

And then his eyes shifted to me.

I was so startled by the sudden intensity of his gaze that my hand jerked. Unfortunately, I'd been holding the pruning shears poised to cut through another stem, and the sharp edge sliced across the back of my finger. Not deep enough to be a medical emergency, but enough to make me suck in a pained breath as my head jerked down.

"Shit," I muttered, flustered as I dropped the shears and the rest of the uncut stems, reaching under the counter to tear off a sheet of paper towel from the thick roll.

"What's wrong, Ari?"

Inaya's low, husky voice came from behind me as she emerged from the back office. Her familiar talcum powder scent drifted into my nose as she appeared at my side, peering down at the wad of tissue on my finger.

"Just a little cut," I told her with a smile, blowing a strand of blond hair out of my face.

Inaya tutted and vanished back into the office, re-emerging with the first aid kit. "Clumsy boy."

I rolled my eyes. I was twenty-six, hardly a boy, and Inaya was only in her early forties, but she'd called me some variation of boy—'handsome boy, sweet boy, clumsy boy'—ever since we'd become friends a few years earlier.

Inaya was the reason I worked as a florist. After gaining my totally fucking useless business degree at university, I'd been working the same bartending job that had gotten me through my student days, already painfully aware that I was unlikely to find a job actually related to my degree that would pay any better.

I'd always loved flowers, and they were my one luxury when I finished uni and started working longer hours at the bar, giving me a tiny bit of disposable income. I'd loitered in Inaya's shop when I came into town, staring intently at the buckets of fragrant roses, slender bundles of sweetpeas, bunches of geometrically perfect dahlias and fat, pastel buds of peonies. Usually, I'd settle on just a few stems to make my own minimalist arrangement.

Eventually, Inaya had begun slipping a few more flowers into my pathetically tiny paper bundles. Then she'd started asking me what my favourites were. Soon, we'd become good friends, and she'd offered to train me as a florist. The pay was only marginally better while I was still learning, but the difference was that I was *happy*. I *loved* my job, and if not for the mountain of student debt sitting round my neck like a millstone, I wouldn't have even cared that I wasn't exactly using my degree.

As Inaya opened the first aid kit on the counter beside me and briskly pulled out an antiseptic wipe and a blue plaster, she glanced up towards the windows and clicked her tongue.

"Ah." I could hear the smirk in her voice, and my cheeks got hot before I even glared over at her. "I can see why you were distracted now. Staring at your handsome stranger again."

“Shut up,” I mumbled, lips twitching into a reluctant smile when Inaya laughed.

“When are you going to just go and speak to him?” she asked as she pulled the tissue away from my finger and swiped the cut with an antiseptic wipe.

I winced at the slight sting, keeping my head bent to watch her light brown fingers against my own pale skin, mainly so I didn’t glance up at Bluebeard again. I was kind of embarrassed. For once, I hoped he *hadn’t* noticed me.

But he had. I knew he had. He’d looked at me.

“I can’t just go up and talk to a stranger, Inaya.” I held my hand still so she could cover the cut in a blue plaster.

“Why not? That’s how you meet people.”

“No, you meet people online and just hope they’re who they say they are,” I muttered, bending my finger once Inaya let go and feeling the plasticky edges of the plaster pulling against my skin. “You don’t just *go up* to people. It’s bad enough that I’ve made eye contact with him. He probably thinks I’m a total creep.”

Inaya snorted, snapping the first aid kit shut and putting the plaster’s wrapper in the bin under the counter. “I’ll take your word for it. It’ll be twenty years for Mehmud and me in November.”

“I know, I know.” I nudged her affectionately with my elbow. “And you’re still so in love it’s sickening.”

“We are.” She gave me a wide grin and pressed the first aid kit into my hands. “Take this back to the office and grab your jacket. Go and get yourself a coffee.”

I gulped, gaze darting over to Holy Grind before I could stop myself. “What?”

“Take a break. I’ll finish up this order.” She gave me a gentle push towards the back office. “Go and strut your stuff in front of your blue-bearded stranger. Make him see what he’s missing.”

“Jesus, Inaya,” I muttered, face getting hot, but I found myself walking to the back office.

After placing the first aid kit back in its place on the shelf, I reached for my jacket even though I wouldn’t actually need it. Holy Grind was, like, ten steps from the entrance of the florist shop. I wasn’t going to freeze to death if I didn’t wear my jacket to grab some coffee.

Unless I was planning to sit outside over there.

I put it on anyway, then found myself shuffling over to the tiny mirror hanging on the wall. My stomach was already jittery with nerves as I tried to make my long blond hair somewhat presentable in its messy bun. I gave myself an awkward smile in the mirror, my dimples popping out.

At least my skin looked good today, although my persistent anxiety over whether I looked too young reared its ugly head. I'd been called *angelic* constantly as a kid thanks to my blond hair and blue eyes, both of which I'd inherited from my Finnish mother. I did what I could to look a bit older, including grungy makeup. With a grimace, I wiped at the eyeliner that had smudged under my blue eyes. Maybe I could play it off as an intentionally messy look.

Throat bobbing with an anxious swallow, I fumbled to untie my apron from around my waist and left it on the edge of the desk. I wasn't going to be gone long, I told myself. I'd just grab a coffee and come straight back. I was *not* going to sit outside like a total creep—especially seeing as Bluebeard knew I worked about ten paces away.

I looked down at my outfit critically. Skin-tight black jeans and a loose, oversized grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up to my elbows. I was wearing my heavy black boots—I never wore heels to work, though I sometimes wore them when I went out for drinks with friends. Fuck standing in heels for eight or more hours.

You're being ridiculous, I told myself viciously as I walked out of the back office and studiously ignored the knowing smile Inaya shot my way. *You're acting like a kid. You find him attractive. So what?*

As I reached the door and pulled it open, the old-fashioned bell tinkling above my head, I cleared my throat. "Want anything?"

"Oh no, you just get yourself a drink and take your time," Inaya said airily. "Maybe sit outside to enjoy the weather. It's cold, but at least the sun's out."

God, she really was like my mum sometimes—which I secretly loved, seeing as my actual mother lived in Helsinki and we only managed to see each other a few times a year. She was far less affectionate than Inaya, as well.

"I'll be right back," I said pointedly, then stepped outside to stop any more cold air getting into the shop. It was late February, just going into

March, but the day was unseasonably sunny, the late morning air crisp and the sky a milky blue.

It was Friday, so town wasn't at its busiest, but Holy Grind was still almost full. There were a couple of tables free outside and a queue just inside the door about four people deep.

And he was still sitting there.

I kept my eyes averted as I strode with purpose across the road, but as I passed between the small metal tables and chairs, I couldn't help it. I physically couldn't prevent my gaze from shifting to the left, directly to where he was sitting, and my stomach squeezed into a tight knot when I saw his dark eyes already fixed on me.

We stared at each other for a second before I collided with something solid, jerking my gaze back in front of me.

"God, I'm so sorry," I stammered to the guy I'd just walked into as he left the coffee shop. I could feel heat rising in my face, knowing Bluebeard had just witnessed that.

The man chuckled, stepping to the side to hold the door open for me. "No worries."

He gave me a tiny crooked smile, eyes turning appreciative as they took me in. He was handsome, with a shaved head and chiselled jaw, dressed in a dark grey woollen peacoat. But I could only give him a distracted smile back, mumbling a 'thanks' as I headed inside, painfully aware that Bluebeard was probably watching.

I inhaled the scent of roasted coffee beans deeply as I joined the queue to calm my nerves, giving the barista, Claire, a faint smile as she glanced over and beamed at me.

"Back again so soon, mate?" She was already tapping my drink order into the till screen when I reached the counter, because I ordered the exact same thing every time. Double espresso iced latte with oat milk. "Late night?"

I winced, giving her a sheepish smile as I held my phone to the card reader until it let out a faint *beep*. "Heh, yeah."

As she scooped ice into a cup and started making my drink, I hovered by the counter and tried my hardest not to keep darting glances over to the windows. I failed several times, my eyes immediately locking on the back of Bluebeard's dark head. He was still lounging carelessly in his seat, an

ankle resting on the opposite knee, scrolling through something on his phone as he smoked another cigarette.

God, he was annoyingly sexy.

"Here you go, babe." Claire slid my drink across the counter with a smile.

"Thanks. See you tomorrow." I picked it up and stirred the straw out of habit as I headed for the door, mixing the espresso fully into the milk.

Even though my stomach was filled with butterflies, I took a sip as I darted another glance at the back of Bluebeard's head.

Just walk straight past and back to the shop. You don't need to sit down at a table. That would make you look even weirder. Just walk casually across the road and don't look back.

Despite that sensible voice in my head, I found myself coming to a stop once I'd stepped back into the cold air. My throat bobbed nervously when I saw the blurry mass of cobalt blue move in my periphery, Bluebeard's head turning to look at me.

Because I was just standing there. Like an idiot.

All the tables out here were filled now, I realised with a sickening jolt. *Okay, just start walking.* I didn't. *Start walking!*

I took a single jarring step forward, then froze in place when a low, gravelly voice sounded on my right.

"You can sit here, if you want."

My scalp tingled. I'd never heard his voice before, but I knew instantly that it was him, even before I turned my head and saw him already looking at me, his eyes even more dark and unfathomable from this close.

Bluebeard.

CHAPTER

TWO

Oh fuck.

His face was expressionless, but his eyes followed me as I took a jerky step closer to his table.

"Um." I licked my lips nervously. "Okay. Thanks."

Neither of us spoke as I pulled out the other chair, the metal legs screeching against the concrete. The two women at the next table glanced over at the sound, the one with a shaved head, wearing a puffer jacket with a fur-lined hood gave me a brief smile that I returned shakily.

What are you doing? I screamed at myself in my head. *Just go back to the shop!*

I lifted my drink and took a slow sip instead, avoiding looking at him opposite me, even though his brightly coloured beard was like a beacon, automatically drawing my eye.

My pulse leapt when he cleared his throat and stubbed out his cigarette. I couldn't stop myself from staring at his long fingers out of the corner of my eye. They were strong, with big knuckles and faded tattoos down the backs—weird symbols that were meaningless to me, old, the ink bleeding deep blue around the edges.

"You don't have to sit here if you don't want." His voice was dry and mostly flat, but I could detect a faint hint of amusement in his tone. My cheeks flushed again.

"No, I'm—Thanks." I took another sip of my drink before setting it down and forcing myself to meet his gaze.

My stomach cramped up with almost overwhelming attraction. He was so much more handsome up close—the smile lines in the corners of his

eyes, the barest hint of dark regrowth at the roots of his beard, the arched eyebrows and long lashes.

We stared at each other in silence for a second. When his gaze dipped to my mouth, I felt just a touch of my confidence return. I gave him a small smile, excitement bubbling inside me when his eyes flared in reaction.

Maybe he *was* attracted to me too.

Rather than smile back, he leaned forward slightly in his seat and held out a big, tattooed hand. "I'm Theo."

Theo. I held my breath for a second as I stared at his hand, then watched myself reach out and grasp it. His fingers enveloped mine, warm and dry, his skin tanned against my pale northern European colouring.

I cleared my throat, hoping my voice would come out somewhat normal. "Ari."

Bluebeard—Theo—glanced down at our linked hands when his thumb brushed against the edge of the blue plaster on my finger. Releasing his grip, he nodded at it.

"Sorry if I startled you earlier."

"Oh!" I let out a nervous squawk of laughter, picking at the edge of the plaster and feeling its adhesive sticking to my fingernail. "That's okay. I can be a little clumsy anyway. Um… so, do you work around here?"

My knee was bouncing anxiously under the table. I grabbed my drink to have another sip, to try and calm my nerves, but I didn't think the caffeine was helping.

Theo shook his head as he pulled out another cigarette. He held the packet out to me, and I couldn't help wrinkling my nose in distaste as I shook my head. *Jesus, he's a chain smoker then*, I thought as I watched him light it and inhale.

Part of me wished that was enough to dampen my attraction to him even just a little—maybe to normal, manageable levels—but it didn't. I didn't think there was anything that would. Unless he was a murderer or something.

"I mostly work from home, but I do have an office in town." He picked up his takeaway cup and had a sip, dark gaze holding mine above the rim. "The coffee place by my office closed down a couple of months ago, so I started coming here."

I nodded, fiddling with my phone nervously. "What do you do?"

“Property management.” He jerked his chin at the florist shop behind me. “You’re a florist, right?”

It was ridiculous, and childish, but my stomach squeezed with excitement over the fact that he’d actually noticed me. God, I was acting like a teenager.

It was hard not to stare at him. Something about him was… I just couldn’t keep my eyes off him for long. It wasn’t even how attractive I found him. It wasn’t the beard, or the piercings, or his tall, thick, imposing frame. It was all those things and none of them at the same time.

It was like something cloaked him, something alluring and unsettling all at once. Something I thought I saw flashes of in his dark eyes when our gazes met briefly through the shop window.

Our eyes locked as he took another drag of his cigarette. I felt my cheeks flush, and silently berated myself when I looked away quickly. This wasn’t me. I wasn’t *shy*. I wasn’t unsure of myself, especially with men. I was flirty and confident. You had to be to dress the way I did sometimes in a fairly small town.

“Yeah.” I sat up straighter and gave him a proper smile, trying to shake off the nerves. “For a few years now. I love it.”

“I hope that won’t stop you doing your work.” He nodded at the blue plaster on my finger.

I snorted with laughter, which loosened me up. “No, it’s a tiny cut. You’re handsome, but I don’t know if you’re handsome enough to cause someone to cut off a finger,” I couldn’t help but add in a teasing tone.

Intrigue sparked in Theo’s dark eyes. One corner of his mouth quirked up into a tiny smile.

“Still, I’d like to make it up to you.” He averted his gaze to his cigarette as he stubbed it out in the ashtray, a shoulder lifting in a tiny shrug. For a split second, he looked almost… vulnerable. “Maybe I could take you out for dinner. Or a drink. Whichever you’d prefer.”

I stared at him, frozen in place. The words took a few seconds to register in my brain.

Had Bluebeard really just *asked me out?*

Oh my god.

“Yes,” I blurted, throat getting hot. “Yeah, that would—I’d like that.”

There was a pause before Theo nodded, lips curling into a tiny smile again. “Great. Which?”

“Oh.” My snort of laughter was kind of embarrassing, but I brushed it off. “Um—dinner would be, uh, fun.”

I immediately worried he’d think I was picking the more expensive option on purpose, but Theo just nodded again and picked up his coffee.

My hand reached out automatically do the same. As I sucked in iced coffee through the rapidly softening cardboard straw, I caught the eye of the lady with the shaved head at the next table over. She grinned at me, eyebrows lifting, and sent me a quick, subtle thumbs up. My mouth twitched with the start of a smile, so I quickly looked back at Theo.

He flashed me a brief but dazzling grin, revealing a little gap between his two front teeth.

“It’s a date.”

CHAPTER

THREE

THEO

My lashes fluttered as I felt the phantom rasp of the claw-tipped hand sliding over my nape, not real but somehow gripping tight, keeping my head immobile.

He was there. Most of the time He retreated, leaving me alone with my thoughts, my body fully mine. Most of the time, He was barely visible to me, except when He chose to show Himself fully. Even then, it was a hazy, distorted projection. Not really Him, no matter how much I longed for it. No matter what I did.

Then there were the times when He was the unseen mass at my side, corporeal and not, a monstrous apparition wavering in the corner of my eye. A shadowy bulk in my periphery. A dark blot in my vision, a blind spot that shouldn't have been there, a wall of heat and smoke and fur and claws. But no one else could see Him.

Including the blond with the impossibly fucking beautiful face. The one I'd noticed working at the florist across the road weeks ago. The one with the dimples and the big blue eyes, who looked like a damn angel and sometimes wore dresses to work that skimmed over his flat chest and the slope of his dick, making my mouth water.

I shuddered when His molten breath ghosted over my cheek, phantom claws sifting through the hair at the nape of my neck and scraping lightly over my scalp. A touch that wasn't really there. Like a memory, or a frustrating sense of déjà vu that made your insides twist with vague yearning.

"You truly want him," He murmured in my ear, His voice a gravelly rumble like rock shifting deep within the earth as I watched Ari cross the street and slip back inside the florist shop opposite Holy Grind.

We'd exchanged numbers and arranged to go out for dinner together tomorrow night—Saturday. I hadn't given a fuck about seeming too eager when I suggested a time so soon. I *was* eager.

My teeth clenched. Admitting the depth of my attraction to Ari could be a mistake, even though I didn't think I could bring myself to lie to Him. He had shown me mercy before, but been intentionally cruel just as often.

My only answer was a barely perceptible nod, and I felt the huff of His hot breath dance over my jaw as He rumbled in amusement. Another shudder wracked my frame when He grazed His jagged phantom teeth over the side of my throat before placing an unnervingly tender kiss there.

Unexpected, bitter resentment washed over me, shockingly strong, as His beast-like head retreated. I looked across the street at the florist shop again, spotting Ari inside at the counter. His head was bent as he examined something, strands of blond hair falling forward, slipping over the elegant slope of his neck.

As if he could sense me watching him, his head rose and his blue eyes locked with mine through the glass. I saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed, betraying his nerves, igniting lust in my belly.

He wanted me as much as I wanted him. I could see it.

I didn't know what He would allow, but His interest in Ari already made me nervous.

I saw him first, I wanted to snap like a child. *Pick someone else this time. Anyone else.*

But that wasn't how it worked.

CHAPTER

FOUR

I spent the rest of the day in an excited bubble that nothing could pierce.

Inaya shot me an indulgent, knowing smile when I practically floated back into the florist shop after arranging my date with Theo. I resisted the urge to throw my arms around her and thank her profusely. I still couldn't quite believe what had just happened.

After weeks of furtively lusting after him, I was actually going on a date with Bluebeard. Theo.

It was pitch black already when I left work. My flatmate Edel had texted me a while ago asking me to pick up milk and strawberries on my way home, so town was already getting empty by the time I left the corner shop and started heading home.

The street was deserted. It had rained earlier and continued to drizzle, so water splashed my boots as I walked through shallow puddles that reflected the yellow glow of the streetlights and the illuminated windows of the last few shops still open. There was always a lull at this time, when the day workers and shoppers went home, before the evening rush of people eating out or going drinking began.

The temperature had dropped considerably once it started raining, so I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jacket and pulled it tighter around me. It didn't take long for a fine mist of rain to coat my face and hair, and I was already thinking about running a hot bath when I got home.

In the winter, when it got dark so early, I tended to take the longer way home, which meant I stayed on the well-lit main roads and didn't have to go through the dingy underpass that had always creeped me out. But tonight,

still riding the high of speaking to Theo and wanting to get out of the rain as soon as possible, I took the quicker route down quiet residential streets.

I regretted it within minutes.

Someone was walking behind me. That wasn't unusual, or even particularly worrying, except… it was. When I heard the splash of footsteps further back on the street, instinctive wariness made my skin prickle. A weird sense of dread washed over me and I picked up my pace.

In my jacket pocket, I slipped each of the keys on my keyring between my fingers and clenched my hand into a tight fist. If I had to fight anyone off, a punch to the face like this could do considerable damage. I may have been pretty small, but that didn't mean I wouldn't do my damn best to fight someone off if they attacked me.

I didn't want to slow myself down by looking back, so I waited until I was turning a corner onto the next road to glance back and see who was following me. They were average height and looked fairly thin under their coat. Their hood was up, so I couldn't see their face, but my heart jolted with a flash of fear when I saw the way they were purposefully striding down the road towards me, shoulders hunched and face hidden.

Maybe they just wanted to get out of the rain like I did, but something was telling me I was in danger. A single car appeared around the corner up ahead, driving slowly over the speedbumps in the road. After it passed me, I glanced back in time to see the beam of its headlights slide over the person following me, revealing a pale, masculine face. His eyes were fixed squarely on me, horrifyingly blank but focused. He started walking faster as the car vanished down the road.

Fuck. My heart was pounding, and I picked up my pace even more until I was speed-walking, but every step forward sent more dread spiralling through my belly. I was going to have to walk through the underpass that ran under the main road—there was no other way to go—and there was no CCTV down there. It was usually empty. And it was hidden.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and fumbled to bring up Edel's number. They didn't answer. I hung up and immediately tried again, but it just went to voicemail a second time. Swallowing hard, I cleared my throat and pretended they'd answered.

"Hey! I'm nearly there." I made sure my voice was loud enough to be heard by the guy behind me, but it was wobbly with fear. "You're waiting just past the underpass, right? I'll be walking through it in a sec."

I went quiet, heart pounding as I listened intently to the sounds coming from behind me, clutching the phone to my ear. I could only faintly hear the splash of his footsteps on the pavement, but I could tell that he was still walking fast to keep up with me.

The underpass loomed up ahead, unnervingly dark within, like a chasm that would swallow me up. I didn't want to go in there, but if I turned around I'd walk right into the guy following me.

"Walking through it now," I said to no one down the phone, feeling sick as the concrete sloped under my feet and I started walking down into the underpass.

My footsteps echoed once I was out of the rain. It stank of piss and damp, graffiti and slime covering the dank walls. Two dim orange lights above illuminated the underpass, casting a sickly glow. One of them blinked on and off like a strobe light, hurting my eyes.

"Hey."

The voice was startlingly close behind me, making me jump and almost drop my phone. I whirled round instinctively, not wanting him at my back.

His hand emerged from his coat pocket, and my vision winked when I saw the gleam of a blade.

"Just give me your bag." His voice was low and hoarse, the words mumbled as he glanced around nervously.

"I-I—" My heart pounded, brain going terrifyingly empty.

"Give me the fuckin' bag," he gritted out through clenched teeth, face sallow and misted with rain. He started striding closer and I stumbled back, getting ready to turn and run.

Before I could, the guy skidded to a halt, nearly tripping from the sudden, jarring stop. His gaze was fixed on something behind me—slightly above me—his face going slack with terror and eyes widening so much that I could see the whites all the way around his irises.

He began stumbling back, babbling nonsense. The blade in his hand landed on the concrete with a clatter as he turned and nearly fell in his haste to get away. His footsteps pounded heavily on the concrete as he ran as fast as he could back out of the underpass and vanished into the rain.

I jerked my head around to see what had scared him, body tensing in preparation to fight someone *else* off, but there was no one there. There was nothing behind me. The underpass was completely empty, and the only

sound other than my pursuer's retreating footsteps was the quiet splash of rain at the entrance.

I was trembling with adrenaline, but my heartrate began to gradually slow as I realised the guy was definitely gone. Slowly turning, I cast another wary look around as I started hurrying out of the underpass, relieved when I made it back into fresh air and light rain.

My body was so tense it felt like I might snap in half as I walked home as fast as possible, jumping at every tiny noise even once I was walking next to the main busy road. Car tyres splashed through puddles and headlights blinded me, hazy and blinking in the rain.

I didn't relax until I was hurrying through the front door to the flat, but by then I was dazed and a little in shock from what had happened. I shucked off my damp coat and left my bag on the floor, toeing off my boots.

I clawed back my damp hair as I started walking down the hallway to the living room.

"Hey." Edel's head appeared, leaning over the back of the sofa to peer down the hallway from the living room. Their box braids slipped down with the movement and swung through the air.

"How was work?" they asked, their German accent making the words heavy.

I made my way into the open-plan living area, the kitchen to my left, a tiny dining table in front by the window, and the couches and TV on my right. Edel's head rolled along the back of the sofa to watch me as I made my way to the other one and sat down stiffly right on the edge.

"I think—I think I was just nearly mugged."

Edel sat up straight immediately, dark eyes widening with shock. "What? Ari, are you okay?"

They scrambled up, wrapping a slim arm around my shoulders as they sat down beside me on the sofa.

"I'm fine," I said woodenly, feeling a little foolish now that I was sitting here with my friend, safe in the warmth and light of the flat. "He didn't—um, he didn't touch me or anything, but he threatened me with a knife."

"*Scheisse*," they hissed, rubbing my shoulder. "Where? Did he take your stuff?"

"No, he… Something spooked him." My brow furrowed with confusion as I stared at the floor. "He ran off."

“Where?”

“In the underpass.” I tensed, knowing Edel was going to get angry at me for going that way.

They huffed as expected. “Ari, you *know* you shouldn’t go that way when it’s dark. It’s not safe around there.”

“I know, but it was raining and I just wanted to get home.” I felt so stupid now. Something *far* worse could have happened to me if the guy hadn’t gotten freaked out by some unseen thing in the underpass.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” Edel tightened their grip around my shoulders. “You should still report it to the police, even though he didn’t rob you.”

I rubbed my face tiredly. “Yeah, maybe.” Dropping my hand, I turned my head to offer Edel a tight smile. “Um, I got your strawberries and milk. They’re by the door.”

Edel gazed back at me, their eyes dark, framed by long, thick lashes. Their lips tipped into a sad, affectionate smile as they shook their head. “Oh, Ari.”

They pulled me into a tight hug, and I relaxed a little more as I breathed in Edel’s familiar patchouli smell. They kissed the side of my head as they pulled back, before standing up.

“I’ll go get them. I was going to make French toast. Do you want some? I’ll make you some tea too.”

I watched them head to the door leading to the hallway. They were already in their pyjamas—pale pink bottoms with little peaches all over them and an oversized, threadbare grey hoodie that they’d had as long as I’d known them—since university.

“Yes please.” I stood up from the sofa. “I feel gross and damp. I’m just gonna have a shower.”

“Put your PJs on,” they called from the hallway, and I heard the rustle of plastic as they picked up the bag. “We’ll watch a film.”

We passed each other in the hall, Edel giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze on their way back to the kitchen. Heading into my bedroom, I flicked on the bedside lamp, bathing the room in a warm yellow glow. My shoulders immediately sagged with relief.

Stripping off my damp clothes and shoving them into the laundry basket, I pulled on my dressing gown and crossed the hall to the bathroom. Edel was standing at the kitchen counter whisking eggs, a pile of two-day-

old slices of bread waiting beside them and the strawberries I'd picked up sitting in a sieve in the sink as the cold tap ran to wash them.

By the time I emerged from the steamy bathroom, my hair wrapped in a towel, I could hear the sizzle of butter in the frying pan, its warm, comforting smell permeating the air. I went into my room and dried off before pulling on my pyjamas. Edel teased me good-naturedly about what they called my "bougie" taste in sleepwear, because I loved silky pyjama sets in rich patterns, and long, flowy robes. I was an adult—no one could stop me from living my best *homme fatale* life.

I sat down at my dressing table to comb through my wet hair and plait it back before slathering on some moisturiser. When I went back into the living room, Edel was already waiting on the sofa, long legs crossed as they flicked through movies on the TV, trying to find something we hadn't already seen. On the coffee table were two plates stacked high with French toast, dusted with powdered sugar and garnished with sliced strawberries. My belly rumbled with hunger. It wasn't the most nutritious dinner, but like I said—adult. I could eat breakfast foods for dinner if I wanted.

"Feeling better?" they asked with a little smile as I sat down beside them heavily, exhaustion hitting me in a wave.

I nodded, and they leaned forward to grab the plates, passing me mine before settling back. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Don't mind," I said around a mouthful of French toast.

They nodded, and I saw them glance at me out of the corner of their eye as they nibbled on a strawberry. "Do you want to talk more about what happened, or try and forget about it tonight?"

My gut clenched. I felt simultaneously freaked out and a little childish, because nothing had actually *happened*, though the fact that it nearly had was unnerving enough.

But what was unsettling me the most wasn't almost being mugged. It was wondering what that guy had seen that had caused him to turn and run so fast from the underpass that he nearly slipped and fell flat on his face.

"Forget it tonight," I said quickly, stuffing more French toast into my mouth and casting about frantically for a new topic. "Um… I met someone today."

Edel perked up, dark eyes flashing as they tucked their long legs under them.

“Met someone? At work?” They muted the TV and dropped the remote beside them on the couch cushion. “Someone who started working there, or…?”

“No. A… um, a guy at the coffee shop across the road.” Thinking about Theo was chasing away the insidious knot of unease in my gut, replacing it with the fizz of pleasant nerves. “I’ve noticed him going there for a while, but, um, today we talked and he… he asked me out.”

“Ooh.” I glanced over to see Edel grinning at me. “What’s he like?”

“*So* hot,” I blurted without thinking, and we both snorted. “I think he’s a little older. He works in property management.”

“Oh, so he’s a suit?” Edel asked, popping a slice of strawberry into their mouth.

“I mean, I *have* seen him in a suit, but he doesn’t look like a typical business guy, I guess. He’s got some piercings. And a, uh, blue beard.”

Edel laughed. “A blue beard? Really?”

I smiled, picturing Theo’s intense, handsome face. “Yeah. It suits him.”

“Well, he sounds interesting.” Edel gave me an enthusiastic nudge with their elbow. “And you haven’t dated for a while. When are you going out?”

“Tomorrow night. For dinner.”

“For *dinner*? Ooh. A proper date, then.”

“Yeah.” My insides swirled, and I dropped my slice of French toast back onto my plate as I let out a little laugh. “Fuck, I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be nervous.” Edel bumped my shoulder with theirs. “I’ve seen you on dates. You’re great, and everyone you meet instantly loves you.”

“Yeah, but…” I fidgeted, then looked at Edel. “I think I really like him.”

They gave me a knowing nod with a little smile. “*Ah*, you felt the pull, *ja?*”

My lips curved up into a wry smile. I was a bit of a sucker for true love, believing in love at first sight and the idea that some people were just… meant for each other. I wasn’t *in love* with Theo, of course I wasn’t, but I *had* felt that pull the first time I saw him. That instant spark of something, that bone-deep attraction, that thing that didn’t really have a name.

“Yeah,” I said, grinning at Edel, excitement blooming in my gut. “I felt the pull.”

CHAPTER

FIVE

"You look great."

I glanced up from my reflection in my dressing table mirror to see Edel standing in my bedroom doorway, one shoulder leaning on the frame with their arms crossed over their chest.

"Yeah?" I fiddled with the hem of my dress. It was plain black, tight and reached mid-thigh, and I'd paired it with my heavy black boots. I was leaving my hair loose, and had smudged some black eyeliner around my eyes for an intentionally grungy look.

"Yeah." Edel shifted against the doorframe. "Where's he taking you?"

I snorted, reaching for my denim jacket. "Hopefully somewhere that'll let in a man in a dress."

Edel grunted in irritation. "Well fuck them if they don't. And fuck him if he doesn't like it either."

I shot them a wry smile, pulling my hair out from under my jacket collar. "He's seen me dressed like this before at work. Don't think it'll be a problem."

"One point to Bluebeard, then." They straightened up as I made my way to the door, giving me a smile. "Your eyes always look huge when you wear make-up like that. Like a little fallen angel," they teased, chucking me under the chin.

I snorted and gave them a good-natured shove. "Shut up."

"Is he picking you up?"

"Yeah." I made my way into the living room to grab my phone, keys and wallet from the kitchen counter, Edel trailing behind me. "I told him I could just walk into town to meet him, but he said he'd meet me here."

“Is it safe to get in a car with him, do you think?”

I shoved my stuff in my jacket pockets and turned to face Edel, giving them a tiny smile. “We’re going to walk in together. But, I mean, I’ve seen him around for a while now. I’ve never got bad vibes from him.”

“I guess.”

“I’ve got my shitkickers on.” I lifted a foot. “If I need to kick him in the balls to get away.”

“Well, hopefully it doesn’t come to that.” Edel’s mouth tilted up into a mischievous smile. “And if it goes *well*, I’ll be at Amir’s tonight. You’ll have the flat to yourself.”

Amir was Edel’s boyfriend, and they’d been together since we all met at university. He was a sweet guy, an IT engineer who loved football and worshipped the ground Edel walked on. He was a big part of the reason why Edel hadn’t returned to Germany after university, instead choosing to stay here to find a graphic design job after their degree.

Nervous anticipation fluttered at Edel’s words. I tried to picture Theo in my bed, but he felt too… big and intense and almost otherworldly to imagine in such a familiar setting. Like the two pieces didn’t quite fit together.

That didn’t stop me briefly daydreaming about what he might look like naked. He looked big and strong, but with that hint of softness around his middle. Fully dressed, I found him ridiculously sexy.

I’d bet he had a decent amount of body hair, and I’d put money on him hiding more piercings under his clothes.

My dick twitched, so I quickly cut off that train of thought. This dress wouldn’t leave all that much to the imagination if I got hard, especially seeing as I was wearing black mesh panties underneath, because… well, just in case this date *did* go well.

“We’ll see,” I told Edel dryly, nerves squeezing my stomach into a tight knot when headlights shone through the living room window. I glanced out to see a car pulling into our designated space.

“*Ach*, there he is.” Edel’s tone was teasing. “I’ll try not to embarrass you, but I *will* be peeking out of the window to catch a glimpse of Bluebeard.”

I laughed, heading back into the hall. “Dork.”

“Have fun!” Edel said as I made my way to the front door. “Call me if you need anything, including a speedy getaway.”

“I will!” I called back before leaving the flat, taking a steadying breath as I made my way down the corridor.

I went out the side exit of the building that led to the parking spots out back, my palms sweating in my jacket pockets as I rounded the corner and saw Theo climbing out of his car. It was already dark, but the streetlights danced over the indigo of his beard as he shut his car door.

I was relieved to see that he wasn’t dressed in an overly formal fashion, just jeans and boots with a dark shirt under a jacket. White teeth flashed as he spotted me and grinned briefly, his car chirping with a flash of lights as he locked it with the key fob.

“Hey.” He walked to meet me, and I tugged my hands out of my pockets when I stopped in front of him, not sure what to do with them.

“Hey.” I shifted from one foot to the other, stuffing my hands back into my jacket pockets.

I saw his eyes roam down my frame, somehow growing even darker in the low light. “You look good.”

His voice was deep and husky, sending tingles over my skin.

“Thanks.” I grinned at him. “So do you.”

God, I wanted to kiss him so badly already. We were both a little awkward, having to begin the process of navigating our way through this new setting together, but that wasn’t lessening the sharp flare of attraction I felt at the mere sight of him. That pull.

“Want to start walking in?” He tipped his head towards the road. When I nodded, we fell into step side-by-side and walked in silence for a minute or so as I tried to think of something to say.

At least it wasn’t raining tonight, the air cold and dry. The main road was busy as people headed into town to enjoy their evening. We passed a group of women dressed up to go clubbing, discussing which pub to stop in first to start the night.

“So, how was your day?” Theo asked, his arm occasionally brushing mine as we walked, sending tingles through my fingers.

“Pretty uneventful. Just work.” I smiled over at him.

For some reason, I didn’t tell him about the weird encounter with my would-be mugger the night before. I’d managed to push it out of my mind after going to the police station that morning and reporting it before I went to work. The officer hadn’t seemed all that interested, seeing as nothing had

really happened, but he'd dutifully taken down the details and told me in a bland voice that they'd look into it.

"Do you work every day? I haven't noticed anyone else in there other than you and your boss."

I bit the inside of my cheek to hide my smile. So Theo had noticed me then, just as I'd noticed him.

"I don't work Sundays or Mondays," I told him, my insides fluttering when he glanced over at me with a tiny wry smile.

"Good job I never bother getting coffee on those days then. Would've had no one to stare at like a creep while I drank it." He cleared his throat and looked away. "Sorry, that probably sounded weird."

"No." I laughed, bumping his arm with my elbow. "I noticed you too."

He side-eyed me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean, you're kind of hard to miss," I teased.

He huffed in amusement. "You'd think."

Before I could ask what he meant by that, a group of young guys up ahead cut through the conversation, yelling and shoving each other jovially as they headed into town.

The pubs and bars were already busy as we made our way down the high street. People stared at us, which I was used to when I dressed like this, but they could just as likely have been staring at the towering man beside me, with his tattoos and piercings and deep blue beard.

A wave of camaraderie washed over me, making me sway closer to Theo as we walked. I liked people who weren't afraid to express themselves in unconventional ways.

I liked *him*.

Theo led me to a little Italian restaurant I'd only been to a couple of times in the past, and I was relieved when the server simply smiled at us and led us to a table without any wary or disdainful looks.

After we sat down, Theo ordered a whiskey sour while I asked for a gin and tonic. Then the server was gone, and I forced myself not to fidget anxiously in my seat. I was nervous. I wanted this to go well.

"How's your finger?" Theo asked, his eyes trailing down my bare arms now that my jacket was off and hanging on the back of my chair.

I smiled and lifted it, showing him the thin cut. "I'll survive."

His lips quirked into a tiny smile, and then he was leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table. My gaze roamed down to his mouth before I

could stop it, my body mirroring him.

"So what would you be doing tonight if I hadn't asked you out?" His long fingers fiddled with the corner of the menu in front of him.

I laughed. "Depends. I live with my friend Edel, and we used to go out a lot more before we, you know, became *responsible adults*. If they're not at their boyfriend's, we usually just watch a film or something." I flushed, worrying that I was making myself sound boring. "Um, what about you?" I asked quickly.

Theo shrugged, leaning back to pick up his menu. "I don't go out much either. And I have a dog, so I can't leave her for too long anyway."

I perked up. "You have a dog?"

"Yeah." He smiled, and it was small but affectionate. "An Alaskan Malamute. She's called Athena."

"I love dogs. We had one growing up. I'd love to have one now, but the flat's rented, so"—I shrugged—"no pets allowed."

"What did you have growing up?"

"A golden retriever." I smiled fondly. "Polly. She was the best."

"Did you grow up around here?"

"Yep." I gave him a sheepish smile. "Went to uni here too. Haven't done all that much travelling, except for visiting my mum in Helsinki. She's Finnish. She moved back over there when I turned eighteen. How about you?"

Theo shrugged. "I've lived all over."

The waitress appeared then with our drinks, halting the conversation. When she asked us if we were ready to order, we both hastily scanned the menus. I ordered a chicken Caesar salad, while Theo asked for spaghetti carbonara.

Once she was gone, I leaned in and smiled at Theo. "You seem like the type to live in London, not out here in the sticks."

We were in northern Essex, only about an hour away from London, but it was a lot quieter here, the town busy but small.

Theo's pierced brow quirked. "Do I?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. You seem… I don't know. Big and important."

He chuckled, picking up his glass to take a sip. "I'm not big and important."

I laughed, leaning back and running my finger down the condensation on the side of my glass. "Well you *look* pretty big and important in those

suits you sometimes wear."

His mouth tipped up into a lopsided smile. "You like the suits, huh?"

I gave him a coy shrug. In my mind, I was suddenly imagining a scenario where Theo strode into my flat in one of those hot three-piece suits while I was lounging seductively—for no reason at all—on my bed in some of my lingerie. And maybe a long, sheer nightgown. And he'd loom over me at the foot of the bed, his dark eyes flashing with lust as he grabbed my ankles and dragged me down, spreading my legs wide—

"Some olives for the table." The waitress's cheerful voice cut through the sordid fantasy, and I felt my cheeks heat as I cleared my throat and lifted my drink to take a gulp.

Theo was watching me, his eyes as dark as I'd just imagined them, as if he could sense where my thoughts had just drifted to.

EVEN THOUGH MY intense attraction to him simmered constantly throughout the evening, the conversation flowed easily while we ate. He talked a little about his work, but said even he found it boring to discuss, so we moved on to more interesting topics. He told me he loved food and cooking, that he had travelled a lot for work, his property empire reaching further than our little town.

Even though he was fairly stoic, he made me laugh with his dry sense of humour, and he flashed me his own grin a couple of times, revealing that little gap between his front teeth that somehow made him seem more human, less imposing.

I wanted him so much that by the time we stood up to leave, I was already wondering how soon I could kiss him.

Theo had insisted on paying despite my protests. As he pulled open the door of the restaurant, he placed a warm hand on the middle of my back and followed me out onto the street. I was pleasantly full from dinner, but my stomach swooped with breathless anticipation.

I wondered if I should suggest going for a drink, but I didn't want to. I wanted to get him back to my place, to see what would happen. To see what he wanted.

We walked in comfortable silence back out of town. The streets were busy now, people spilling out of the bars and pubs and shouting drunkenly to each other, bouncers checking IDs and arguing with those who were already too drunk to get let into places.

One drunken guy yelled to Theo that he liked his beard as he stumbled past us, making me smile. I heard Theo huff in amusement, but he walked a little closer to me as another group of guys walked past us and leered at me.

Swallowing nervously, I slipped my hand out of my jacket pocket and hesitantly tangled my fingers with his. Theo immediately gripped them tight, not saying anything.

We walked hand in hand back to my place, nervous anticipation tightening my chest with every step. I didn't let go of Theo's hand as we stepped into the building, leading him to my front door.

When I turned to face him, he shot me a tiny smile. "Sorry if I didn't talk enough. I'm, uh, kind of quiet. Don't socialise much."

"You did." I smiled up at him, daring to take a step closer. "I had fun."

His eyes darkened as they focused on my mouth. "Me too."

We were both leaning in. I tilted my chin up, and my breath caught when the first gentle rasp of his beard brushed my chin. Then his mouth was on mine, and my hands shot up to palm his chest before slipping under the sides of his jacket to wrap around him.

Theo's fingers threaded through my hair, his lip ring warm and solid against my lower lip. Our tongues met as the kiss deepened, and I shivered when I felt the metal barbell pressing against my tongue.

I gripped the solid wall of his back, my knees going weak as he thrust his tongue deep and took over the kiss. His unique scent filled my nose—like burning wood, only the faint hint of cigarette smoke clinging to his beard.

Long moments stretched as the kiss went on, and I felt dazed when we finally pulled back. Theo's hands slid round to frame my face, thumbs brushing over my cheekbones. I couldn't contain my grin as I opened my eyes to look up at him.

His lips curved into a tiny, lopsided smile as he gently pushed his thumb against the dimple in my cheek.

"I've been counting every time I got these dimples to make an appearance tonight," he murmured, which made me grin even wider.

"How many?"

He dropped his hand and lifted his shoulder in an adorably sheepish shrug. “I lost count.”

Another point to you, Bluebeard.

Biting my lip around my smile, I sought out his hand and tangled our fingers together. “Want to come in?”

His dark eyes flared with arousal, seeming to gleam almost unnaturally for a split second. “Yes, dimples. I do. If you want me to.”

I unlocked the front door and stepped into the flat, pulling Theo in behind me. “I want you to.”

CHAPTER

SIX

Despite us both being fully aware of what I'd invited him in for, I didn't lead us straight into my bedroom. Sweet nerves bloomed in my belly, Theo's big hand still clasped in mine as he followed me down the hallway to the living room.

"Do you want a drink or anything?" I asked.

Edel had left a single lamp on beside one of the sofas, so the room was only dimly lit with a warm glow. I didn't turn on any of the other lights, dropping Theo's hand to shrug off my jacket.

He did the same, looking around with mild interest. "I'm good, thanks. Your place is nice."

I got a glass from the cupboard and filled it with tap water as I answered, "Thanks. Edel and I have lived here for a few years now. I was initially wary about living on a ground floor flat, but"—I shrugged, taking a sip of water—"it's been fine."

"I'm guessing they're not here."

I smiled over the rim of my glass. I hadn't outright told Theo that Edel was nonbinary when I mentioned them over dinner, but he'd clearly been paying attention and picked up on their pronouns.

"No, they're at their boyfriend's." I smiled coyly at him. "Just us."

His eyes flared and he took a step closer to me, looking almost like a beastly predator in the low light, his beard a deep indigo, strands of long hair falling loose from their bun to frame his handsome face. My stomach tightened with want, and I took another sip of water to wet my dry mouth before holding out the glass to him.

He paused, then gave a tiny smile as he took it and dutifully had a sip before setting it on the counter. When he stalked closer, my cock twitched in my flimsy panties.

"Thanks for dinner," I said, my voice almost embarrassingly breathy as his big hands slid around my waist.

He dipped his head and nuzzled just below my ear, placing a soft kiss there. I shivered as he murmured, "You're welcome."

My hands slid up his strong arms, over his wide shoulders, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. Eyes sliding shut, I tilted my head to give him greater access to my neck, and he rewarded me by dropping another slow kiss there before trailing his mouth inward along my jaw.

When he kissed me, I moaned softly into his mouth and parted my lips to let his tongue sweep inside. The bristle of his beard tickled my skin, and the rasp of his tongue bar made my cock start to plump up in a rush.

His hands slid down to grip my ass and give it a surprisingly forceful squeeze, jerking me tighter against his big body. My eyes popped open as I let out a muffled—delighted—moan, and for a second it looked like something was filling the doorway to the hall behind Theo. A shadowy bulk that blocked out the weak lamplight and the long shadows it cast.

Two pinpricks of white flared from the darkness, but then Theo was tightening his grip on my backside and hefting me into his arms. I shuddered, tongue sinking eagerly into his mouth as my eyes slid shut and my hardening cock rubbed against his stomach through layers of fabric.

He started moving, carrying me somewhere, and we only broke the kiss when he sat back heavily on one of the sofas with me straddling his lap. My dress hiked up as my thighs spread until it was barely concealing my panties from his gaze. The outline of my cock was visible through the tight black fabric, and Theo's eyes fixed on it hungrily.

"All night I've been wondering what you've got on under this dress," he murmured, big hands sliding up and down my thighs, his fingertips just brushing the rucked-up hem of my dress with every pass, making me shiver.

A smirk tipped up one corner of my mouth, and I leaned in to place a soft kiss just beneath his ear. Theo made a low sound in the back of his throat, fingers gripping tighter.

"I'm wearing panties," I told him, wrapping my arms loosely around his neck and moving my hips just a little when I felt his dick jump beneath me.

"Fuck," he bit out.

Turning his head sharply, he caught my lips with his and thrust his tongue into my mouth. I moaned, melting on his lap, my hips rocking again to rub my ass against the hard bulk of his cock.

Oh fuck. I shivered when his long fingers slipped under the hem of my dress and trailed up my inner thigh. A warm palm cupped my sac, making my hips twitch. Theo let out a low, rumbling moan into my mouth as his thumb stroked the base of my cock through the mesh.

The thin fabric stretched taut as he fisted my dick in a firm, unyielding grip. The hint of roughness made me grunt into his mouth, tongue thrusting anxiously. My hips tried to arch forward, but Theo's fist tightened, stopping me with a brief flare of pain that made me suck in a sharp breath. My cock throbbed and tried to buck.

He noticed. Breaking the kiss, he tilted his head back against the couch and watched me through dark, impenetrable eyes. Releasing my cock, he slipped his hands under my dress and around to grip my ass, fingers splayed wide.

"Lean back." His voice was gravelly, and his calm, authoritative tone made my stomach tighten with excitement.

I obeyed immediately, steadying myself on his spread knees. My dress had hiked up, barely concealing my panties anymore, and my hard cock jutted obscenely under the fabric in the stretched-out position. I stared at Theo in silence, breathing fast through my nose as my teeth clamped down on my lower lip and my fingers dug into his knees. Heart pounding, I waited.

His dark eyes flashed with the realisation of what I wanted. For him to take the lead. For him to tell me what to do.

But he stayed quiet, waiting until I was squirming with impatience. Only then did he squeeze my backside before sliding his hands down my thighs.

"Show me your cock," he rasped, gaze drifting down my frame to settle between my legs.

My teeth sank deeper into my lip to suppress my whimper. Hand trembling, I tugged up the front of my dress to expose my black panties, my stiff dick clearly visible under the sheer fabric. Theo groaned deep in his chest as I carefully peeled down the mesh and tucked it behind my tight sac.

My bare cock twitched under his heavy gaze. I returned my hand to his knee, leaning back as I waited. It somehow felt even more vulnerable to still

be clothed, just my hard dick exposed and curving up between us, than to be completely naked. I shivered, spread thighs tensing as I straddled his lap.

My breath hitched in anticipation when Theo's hand lifted from my thigh, but instead of wrapping it around my twitching dick, he raised it to cup my face. His dark gaze bored into mine as he thumbed my lower lip.

"You want me to touch your cock?" he asked, his quiet voice still imposing in the otherwise silent room.

I licked my lips and shakily said, "Y-yes."

"I bet you do." His thumb brushed my mouth again, making goosebumps break out all over. His other hand trailed higher up my leg until his fingertips danced over my sensitive inner thigh, exhilaratingly close to my sac. "Look how hard you are."

My chest rose on a shaky inhale. "P-please."

"You have to earn it."

What? I stared at him, panting shallowly. Theo gazed back, the piercing above his eye catching the low light, flashing as his brow twitched.

I waited for him to tell me how. To tell me what to do to please him. His thumb brushed lightly over the seam of my mouth, and I found myself parting my lips and sucking it inside. Theo groaned as I shivered, skimming my tongue over his skin, my cheeks hollowing as I sucked like it was his cock.

"Don't stop." He gripped my thigh hard, fingertips digging in. "Take my cock out. Keep sucking."

I whimpered around his thumb as my fingers uncurled from his knees. Wobbling only a little, lightheaded with lust, I fumbled with his fly, my hands clumsy as I reached into tight boxer briefs and reverently grasped the hard, thick length within.

Moaning low around his thumb, I carefully pulled his cock out, staring down at the deeply flushed length in my pale hand. I nearly whimpered when I saw the Prince Albert piercing on the head. My fingers squeezed automatically, testing the slight supple give and appreciating the silky-smooth texture. Theo grunted, hips jerking when my thumb brushed the thick vein winding directly up the underside.

I gave his dick a single stroke, but then Theo's deep voice froze me in place.

"I didn't say you could stroke me off yet, Ari."

I lifted my gaze to stare at him, lips going slack around his thumb. He stroked the pad of it along the length of my tongue before pulling it free. Lowering his hand, he brushed his slick thumb over the leaking tip of my cock. The touch was so featherlight that it made my hips jerk as a clipped groan escaped me.

Theo sucked the pre-cum off his thumb, watching me steadily. “Get on your knees, Ari.”

I was scrambling to obey before I’d even fully processed the order, my knees thudding onto the hardwood floor between Theo’s spread legs. My cock throbbed as I looked up at him, tentatively placing my hands on his thick thighs. My chest heaved with my fast breaths.

“Good boy.”

Goosebumps broke out all over, his voice exciting me and terrifying me at the same time. It had sounded… wrong. Still deep and rusty, but… different. Bassier. Almost layered. Like it echoed in my head around the words, coming from everywhere at once.

The words, though… the words alone made my dick get even stiffer in a painful rush. Made me forget everything else.

My hands slid down to grip his calves like a lifeline as I stared up at him, breathing hard. His thick cock rose up between us, a prominent, unyielding column that made my mouth go dry. But beyond that… for a split second, I could have sworn his pupils were a blinding white in the centres of his dark irises. When he blinked, I realised it must have just been a trick of the light.

A big hand reached out and cupped my face, thumb stroking over my cheekbone in an achingly gentle touch. Then the other joined it to carefully gather all of my long blond hair up into his fist.

I sucked in a sharp breath when his fingers tightened, gripping my hair and yanking my head back so I had no choice but to stare up at him. My nuts tingled, a tiny whimper escaping me.

“You want to suck my dick, don’t you?”

Theo’s tight grip wouldn’t allow me to nod, so I licked my lips and whispered, “Yes.”

“You want my cum.” His free hand gripped my chin and tugged, forcing my lips apart. He was keeping my whole head immobile, and it was making me lightheaded with arousal. “I’m negative, so you can have it all if you’re good.”

“Please,” I whispered, gazing up at him pleadingly.

His fist tightened in my hair, drawing my head closer to his lap—to that thick, throbbing cock and the heavy twin weights below. His balls were already drawn up, betraying how turned on he was despite his calm and controlled demeanour.

“Use your mouth,” he rasped. “And your tongue. But you can’t suck it yet.”

“W-why not?” I breathed, even though I was already sticking out my tongue to lick over that thick vein on the underside of his cock.

Theo groaned through clenched teeth, fingers gripping tighter. Sharp pain flared in my scalp, making me wince even as my dick jerked and drooled precum onto the floor from the jolt of pleasure that chased it.

“Not yet, Ari.” He guided my mouth up to the weeping head of his cock. “Not ’til I say.”

I moaned desperately as my tongue curled around the head, licking up the pre-cum pulsing from the tip and flicking over the curved metal bar piercing the vulnerable flesh. Theo’s fist loosened infinitesimally, just enough for me to move closer and press my mouth to the V of his cockhead in an open mouthed kiss. I looked up at him through my eyelashes as I kissed again, brushing my tongue against hot, smooth skin and warm metal. My lips slid up, taking the wet tip inside—

“I said no sucking yet.” Theo’s fist tightened and tugged, jerking my mouth back. My balls wrenched up, cock pulsing. “I thought you were going to be a good boy.”

My nuts throbbed. “I am.” My voice was breathy and embarrassingly needy. “I’ll be good, I promise. I—”

“Get my cock nice and wet.” He guided my head closer again. When my tongue shot out to lap at the flushed, swollen tip, Theo’s breath shuddered out of him and he sank deeper into the sofa. “That’s it.”

I felt him wrap more of my hair around his fist, but he didn’t impede my movements as I licked down his entire length and back up, desperation making me slick my tongue over every inch of him. When I dipped the tip of my tongue into his slit, Theo grunted as his hips jerked. When I trailed my lips down his shaft to his balls, he let out a long groan.

I didn’t know if the ‘no sucking’ rule extended to his nuts, and I didn’t want to risk it. I wanted to be good for him. So I wound my tongue around each tight globe, stroking over the seam in the centre of his sac.

I realised he hadn't specified whether or not I was allowed to use my hands. Glancing up briefly, I paused when I saw his eyes doing that weird reflection thing again, the pupils almost glowing white in his dark irises. He blinked and the effect was gone, so I slid my hands up his legs to grip his thick thighs. Then I trailed one even higher to push his shirt up and out of the way.

The slight give of his stomach under coarse hair made me moan. I kissed the base of his shaft before burying my nose in the thatch of dark hair at the root, then skimmed my nose higher to nuzzle his belly as I curled my fingers around his cock.

Theo moaned low, thighs tensing beneath me. His cock throbbed in my fist, but he gently drew my head back with his grip in my hair.

"No hands."

I moaned dazedly and let go of his cock, dipping my head to lick up all the fresh pre-cum that had spilled. Theo drew my mouth down the side of his shaft and tightened his grip, holding my head in place as his hips bucked. Our eyes met—mine heavy and glazed with lust, his tight and intense as he watched his cock slide over my wet, parted lips.

His breathing sped up as his hips moved faster, fist tightening and tightening in my hair, making my vision go spotty with lust as sharp spikes of pain blurred into pleasure. My cock reeled, heat gathering in the pit of my stomach. My brows pinched with desperation, and I knew my expression was pleading as I gazed up at Theo above me.

His eyes started to roll back before he forced his hips to stop. I could feel the faint tremor in his hands when he drew my head back by his grip on my hair. His chest was heaving, and he took a few seconds to come down from the edge before he leaned forward, the sofa creaking as his weight shifted.

"Look how hard your cock is." His free hand cupped my cheek again, the gentle caress so at odds with the brutal grip he had in my hair. "You're making a mess."

Trembling wildly, I looked down and stared through lust-glazed eyes at my dripping cock. He was right. The head was purpling, a thin thread of pre-cum dangling from the tip and a tiny puddle forming underneath on the floor.

I was pretty sure a single stroke would bring me off. Which meant my gut clenched up with fear and aroused anticipation when Theo thumbed my

damp lower lip and murmured, “Stroke it.”

My breath left me in a rush. “I—I’ll come,” I said unsteadily.

“No, you won’t.” His tone brooked no argument. “You’re not going to come until I say so.”

I sank my teeth into my lower lip. “B-but I—”

“Grab your cock and stroke it.” He sat back. “And then I’ll let you suck me off.”

He’d *let* me suck him off. How fucking arrogant.

I loved it.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

His words had me reaching down with a shaking hand. My whole body spasmed from the barest brush of my fingertips over the sensitive head of my dick, and I could feel the orgasm building before I'd even finished curling my fingers around my length.

"I—" The grip in my hair had loosened just enough for me to turn my head and bury my face in Theo's thigh. My hips jerked. I strangled the base of my cock to hold off the impending orgasm. "F-f-fuck."

"Jesus, you're desperate to come, aren't you?" Theo's low voice was awed, cutting through the white noise in my head as I panted against denim and forced my orgasm back. "You're going to suck me off, and when you make me come, you come with me. Yes?"

I nodded frantically, fingers twitching around my throbbing length.

Theo retightened his grip in my hair to force my head up, meeting my gaze. His other hand gripped his cock and stroked once.

"How much do you want to take?"

Oh god. My eyes dropped to his dick. It was long and thick, but a length that wasn't overwhelmingly intimidating. The base was deeper in tone than the angrily flushed head, surrounded by a short nest of dark curls.

I swallowed and lifted my gaze back to his. His eyes were once again reflecting the light in that strange way. It almost looked like his irises were bleeding into the whites of his eyes. But I was too aroused to care—too close to coming. Too close to finally sucking his dick into my mouth and drinking him down.

“All of it,” I said hoarsely, my belly swooping with something more than lust when Theo’s eyes flared with appreciation.

He released his cock to cup my cheek again. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” I licked my lips and gave my dick a single stroke, which made my breath shudder out of me as pleasure spiked.

Theo took my free hand and placed it on his inner thigh. My fingers automatically stroked over the skin-warmed denim.

“Pinch me here if you want to stop.” He loosened the fist in my hair a touch and waited until I nodded before releasing my hand. “Good boy.” I shivered hard as the words escaped him, his voice so low and gravelly. “Ready?”

“Yes,” I said immediately, licking my lips, staring at the bead of pre-cum welling on the tip of his cock. It meandered over the metal barbell, catching on the ball and hanging there suspended.

“Look at me, Ari,” he rumbled out.

When I reluctantly tore my gaze from his cock, he was gazing down at me with an expressionless face, but I could see the heat blazing in his dark eyes.

“You want me to fuck your throat?”

I shuddered out a breath, my dick throbbing. “Yes.”

“Mm.” He tightened his grip on my hair and tilted my head back, his other hand wrapping lightly around my throat. I swallowed, Adam’s apple pushing into his palm. “You want me to be rough?”

“Yes,” I rasped immediately.

The sofa creaked as he leaned forward. His thumb stroked over my vulnerable throat, and his beard tickled my face as he gave me a soft kiss, jarringly at odds with his ruthless grip on my hair.

“Sure?” he asked, searching my eyes intently. “You can say no, sweetheart.”

Oh god. I shivered and licked my lips, moaning in gratitude when he kissed me again.

“I know I can.” My voice was hoarse with lust. “I’m sure. I want you to.”

His lips curved into a tiny smile, thumb stroking over my hammering pulse point again. “Good boy.”

Theo must have noticed the way my pupils flared in reaction to him calling me that, because he let out a little amused huff before leaning back.

“Don’t forget to keep stroking your cock.” He released my throat to palm my cheek lovingly.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek as I obeyed automatically, sliding my fist up and down once. My hips jerked, body wanting to curl inward to fruitlessly try and fend off the orgasm already churning.

“Theo, I’ll come.” I gazed up at him pleadingly and saw his jaw clench as his eyes flared with arousal.

“If you come before I do, I’ll have to punish you.” His tone was calm and measured, but his cock jerked in front of my face, flushed and leaking.

I had to squeeze the base of my shaft to hold back my orgasm, the fingers of my other hand digging hard into Theo’s inner thigh. The muscle flexed under my palm as he groaned. His big chest heaved as he stared down at me, brows pinched in an expression that looked angry at first, except I knew it wasn’t.

“Open your mouth, sweetheart.”

I did, and he used his grip on my hair to guide me closer. He released my face to wrap long, tattooed fingers around his stiff cock, tilting it towards me. I stuck my tongue out in anticipation, breathing fast, and moaned when he tapped his wet cockhead against it.

“Suck.”

I obeyed, moaning around his length as he fed more into my mouth. His piercing rubbed against my tongue, the taste of warm metal mingling with his pre-cum. Fighting against his tight grip on my hair, I sank my head lower to take more of him. Theo groaned, releasing his cock to palm the back of my neck.

My throat spasmed, eyes watering and gag reflex trying to kick in as I fought to take more. Taking a deep breath in through my nose, I relaxed my throat so that the flared head of his cock could slide in, plugging it. My chest heaved reflexively, but I managed to suppress the gag and keep my throat relaxed. Squeezing my own cock in a trembling hand, I swallowed.

Theo hissed, thighs flexing, hips straining up for a brief moment to press his cock deeper. The hand on my nape tightened, but he didn’t prevent me from rising up when I needed to breathe. I coughed and sucked in a shaky breath, strings of spit connecting my trembling mouth to Theo’s red, straining cock.

“Such a good boy,” he rumbled, hand sliding round from my nape to thumb my lower lip. “Still want me to fuck your throat, sweetheart?”

“Yes.” I gazed up at him, unable to resist giving my own reeling cock a slow stroke that made me shudder. “Please.”

“Stick your tongue out.”

Theo’s thighs tensed as he planted his boots more firmly on the floor, making my belly lurch with anticipation. My scalp was tingling when he finally released my hair, but he immediately threaded his fingers through the strands to palm my head with both hands.

“Deep breath, Ari.”

I barely had time to obey before his cock was sliding deep again—so deep my nose pressed against his pubic hair. My chest spasmed once, and I let out a choked, guttural groan as his piercing rubbed against the very back of my tongue.

Obscene sounds filled the room as he started fucking my throat, pounding his cock in hard and fast. My eyes streamed, body trembling from the sharp stab of adrenaline that filled me as my air was cut off. I had enough sense to slide my hand down to his knee before I gripped tight, not wanting him to mistake it for my signal telling him to stop. I didn’t want him to stop.

At least the intensity of it had lessened the pressing need to come, allowing me to fist my cock and stroke fast while he jerked my head down to meet his thrusting hips. His breaths were snarling out of him, fingers gripping my scalp tighter.

“Fuck,” he bit out, and then his voice grew deeper, more guttural, throbbing through my head. “Good boy. You’re doing so well for him.”

Before I could fully process the strangeness of those words, Theo let out a sharp groan—almost a whine—as his hips stuttered.

“Fuck,” he rasped again, his voice sounding more familiar. “*Fuck*. I’m gonna come.”

I moaned desperately around the cock pummelling my throat, trying to convey just how much I wanted it. My head was spinning, face hot from the lack of air, tears streaming down my cheeks as my eyes watered nonstop from my determination to keep my throat open for him.

Theo let out a long, shuddery groan and tightened his fists in my hair. I felt the pulse of his cock, the base flexing against my tongue as he pumped his cum down my throat. My head started to throb from the lack of air, chest heaving as my lungs tried to fill instinctively. When he lifted my head

and lowered his hips, I let out a wrenching cough and sucked in a trembling breath.

My head felt spacy as Theo pulled me up into his lap, peeling my fingers off my cock and fisting it alongside his. My hips jerked, sliding my dick against the wet length of his shaft. My vision whited out from the intensity of it.

"You did so good," Theo rasped, his free hand gripping my hip as he stroked our cocks together, even though his was surely reaching the point of oversensitivity. "You can come for me now, sweetheart."

I cried out, burying my fingers in his hair and pulling half of it free from his bun. I pressed my mouth against his temple as my cock started spurting, the orgasm brutal, so powerful it almost hurt.

I was shaking uncontrollably when it ended. My mouth dry from my panting breaths, I swallowed and immediately winced at the ache in my throat. Uncurling my trembling fingers from Theo's hair, I slowly sat back on his thighs and let my hands fall to his chest. I could feel his heart pounding fiercely through his shirt.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, reaching up and carefully wiping my wet cheeks before thumbing away the spit all over my chin.

I let out a long, blissful exhale and smiled, still feeling lightheaded. "Yeah."

Theo watched me in silence for a moment before wrapping his arms around my middle and pulling me closer. I sighed again as I rested my cheek on his shoulder, breathing in the scent of his throat. His beard tickled the side of my face, the faint smell of smoke clinging to it.

Big hands rubbed my back soothingly, causing me to melt into his body. I didn't know how long we stayed like that, but once my head felt clearer and my heart was no longer pounding so hard in my chest, I pulled back.

"Shit." I looked down between our bodies. "I got cum on your shirt."

Theo huffed a laugh, letting his head drop back onto the couch. "I don't care. No one's going to see me between here and the car anyway."

I licked my lips nervously. "You can stay if you want. And I'll, uh, I can wash your shirt for the morning."

He lifted his head and looked at me in silence, making me feel even more vulnerable for asking the question. He gave me a tiny smile as he raised a hand to thumb my swollen lower lip.

"I wish I could, but I have to get back for Athena."

“Oh, right. Of course.” I chuckled and clambered off his lap as gracefully as I could. Clearing my throat awkwardly, I fixed my panties and pulled my dress down over my thighs.

Theo stood up from the couch with a groan, stuffing his dick back into his underwear and buttoning his jeans. He closed the distance between us and cupped the back of my head, gazing down at me solemnly.

“I wasn’t too rough on you, was I?” His other hand came up to palm the side of my neck, thumb gently stroking over my Adam’s apple. I shivered from the touch.

“Just as rough as I wanted.” I gave him a coy smile.

His eyes flared, and he leaned down to kiss me again. I fisted my hands in his shirt, clinging on as our tongues glided together languidly.

Yet another point to Bluebeard.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

THEO

The inside of my car was cold when I climbed in, but I didn't start the engine right away.

Staring straight ahead, gripping the steering wheel so tight my knuckles bleached, I licked my dry lips.

"You can't do that," I croaked. I couldn't feel Him here with me, but that didn't mean He wasn't nearby.

He was always nearby.

"You can't… try and take over when I'm with someone like that." Fear shot through me, and I wondered what my punishment would be for talking to Him like this. For telling Him what He couldn't do. "It's not fair. It's not fair to Ari."

Only silence greeted me. Not that when He spoke, it was anywhere other than inside my own head. But the car felt truly empty aside from me. I couldn't smell His terrifying but alluring scent of fire and smoke, as though the whole world was burning and it would just be me left standing alone in the ashes.

"Please just let me have him," I whispered, my eyes seeking out the window to Ari's flat. I couldn't see him in there, but the lamp in the living room was off already. "Don't take this one from me."

He didn't answer.

CHAPTER

NINE

I moved in a languid haze through the flat after Theo left, going into the living room to switch off the lamp before heading to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face.

My eyes were gritty with exhaustion as I got undressed for bed, peeling off my panties, which felt damp and uncomfortable from the cum smeared in them. I struggled out of the dress, leaving everything in a pile on the floor to deal with in the morning.

After slathering on serum and moisturiser, I put on my oversized silky pyjamas and slipped into bed. As I reached over to turn out the bedside lamp, I realised I'd left my door open. I was too tired to get back up and close it, and I knew I'd be up before Edel got home anyway.

The room plunged into darkness as the lamp clicked off, and I settled down with a contented sigh. I could feel myself dropping into sleep rapidly, body loose and relaxed from my bone-melting orgasm and the emotional comedown from being roughly handled. I stretched lazily, savouring the cool slide of my silky pyjama bottoms against my legs.

I was moments from oblivion when something jerked me back into a fully alert state. My eyes cracked open, cheek still squashed into the pillow.

The flat was quiet, only the typical ambient sounds disturbing the night. The faint hum of the fridge, the muffled murmur of a TV in another flat. The low rumble of an engine drifted in from outside, and my tired eyes slid focused on the window as a car's headlights flashed through the gap in the curtains, sending a shaft of yellow light slicing through the darkness of my bedroom.

There's something in here.

The words whispered through my mind before I'd even registered seeing the unfamiliar shape standing in the corner next to the window. Tucked in beside my wardrobe. A tall shadow that shouldn't have been there.

I blinked, still staring even after the car drove on and the room fell pitch black again.

But it was like I could still *see* it.

It was like it was a void—something darker than the darkness, sucking up any tiny specks of light. Black against the blackness. Tall. Looming.

Bad, my brain supplied. Instinct tightened my limbs, telling me I was in danger.

The air in the room was wrong all of a sudden. It was like it really *was* a void, and it was sucking up all the oxygen. My breaths were escaping me in shallow spurts, I realised, like I was a terrified rabbit caught in the predatory gaze of a wolf.

Twin pinpricks of white flared for a split second from the corner, then vanished.

My vision went spotty, eyes burning as they stayed fixed on that dark corner. I nearly choked on a breath when I saw the thing *move*.

It got taller, rising up. There was something on the top of its head—something wide and sharp. At first my brain thought *mandibles*, and I got visions of a monstrously huge insect scuttling up my bedroom wall. Pure terror froze me in place.

I was sweating, I realised. My heart hammered so hard in my chest that I was convinced it would cause the… *thing* to lunge and attack me. It was just a shadowy shape, but it *wasn't*. I could tell I wasn't alone in my room anymore, I could feel the change in energy. Something else was here.

And it was watching me.

A dark, hot scent filled the room. Like a burning forest—wood crackling, water boiling away to steam, stone baking, the very earth heating up.

The thing moved.

I was clutching my duvet, the fabric growing warm and damp under my sweating palms. The thing *glided* across my bedroom, like it wasn't even using legs or feet. The movement was so horrifyingly inhuman that I stopped breathing entirely, unable to do anything but watch it get closer.

It stopped at the foot of the bed. Went perfectly still. I could only just see it now, too petrified to move my head even an inch, my eyeballs straining hard as I tried to keep it in my sight. Vibrant colours danced in my vision from the effort, and I knew my breathing was too fast and hard and loud, but I was close to hyperventilating and I couldn't stop it.

It's watching me, my brain supplied. I bit the inside of my cheek to hold back a desperate sob, my chest hitching and my stomach cramping with fear.

It's watching me it's watching me it's watching me

The figure dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut all at once, vanishing into nothing.

Or crawling under my bed.

Oh god

Please stop please go away I can't

I wanted to burst into tears, and only pure terror at what it might do if I was too loud kept the sobs at bay. I strained my ears, trying to hear any noises coming from under my bed, and quickly realised that it was utterly silent now. All those tiny constant sounds in the flat were gone, like someone had plugged up my ears with cotton wool.

I could hear my own frantic pulse in my ears. I could hear my fucking *blood* pumping around my body, a horrible soft *woosh* that made my limbs throb. I sucked in tiny breaths, not taking in enough air, drenched in sweat. I finally tore my gaze away from the spot where the figure had vanished to stare at the edge of my bed, expecting to see those mandibles rising up. Those white eyes blinking at me from inches away.

Nothing happened for long minutes. I slowly realised that the energy in the room felt different once again—no longer so oppressive. No longer like there was a vacuum sucking up all the oxygen, all the life. My body started to unclench, trembling breaths steadying.

Then I heard it.

Coming from the living room. A low, constant mumbling sound that hadn't registered at first. But as my brain calmed and picked it out, I realised what it was.

A voice.

Someone was in the living room mumbling to themselves, a continuous stream that didn't stop or change in tone or inflection. Just quiet words spilling out one after another, tangling together.

It wasn't a language I knew. Or maybe it was—maybe it was English and I was just too petrified to comprehend the words. The voice made prickles break out across my entire body in a wave.

The voice, for some reason, scared me more than the figure had.

I bit down so hard on my lower lip I tasted metal. My eyes fixed on the dark oblong of my phone on my bedside table. All I had to do was reach a hand out to grab it. I could text 999, right? That was a thing? Or I could text Edel. Or Theo. Anyone. I just needed someone, because there was a fucking person mumbling to themselves in my living room.

Don't cry, don't cry. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, my face crumpling before I swallowed and looked at my phone with determination.

But the moment I shifted my hand just an inch under the sheets, the voice stopped. Like it had heard me move.

Fuck. My vision whited out completely with terror as I froze. There was utter silence.

I jumped violently when the voice barked a single word, a word I didn't know or understand, in a language I'd never heard, before every single light in the flat flared to life. I heard a bulb pop in the living room before I was plunged back into darkness, but the brief moment of illumination gave me enough courage to lunge for my bedside lamp. I nearly sobbed in relief when it flicked on, bathing the room in warm orange light.

I snatched up my phone and immediately twisted so my back was to the headboard—so nothing could sneak up behind me. I was panting wildly as I stared around the room, my sweat-damp hair hanging in my face.

Everything was in its usual place. The lightbulb in my lamp hummed softly, the familiar sound far more comforting than it should be.

My fingers were trembling as I unlocked my phone and pulled up Edel's contact details. Hitting *Call*, I held the phone to my ear and tried to calm my breathing. My heart was pounding.

It was only when Edel answered, their voice groggy, that I realise I'd have to *tell* them what had just happened.

Would they think I was crazy?

"Ari, what's wrong?"

I could hear the shifting of fabric as Edel sat up. A sleepy mumble sounded in the background—Edel's boyfriend Amir asking what was going on.

“Shh,” Edel scolded, then their voice got louder again. “Ari, what’s wrong? Has something happened? Are you okay?”

I briefly pulled the phone away to check the time. 2 a.m. I winced. No wonder Edel was already concerned that I was calling.

“I’m fine,” I said shakily, my voice barely louder than a whisper. I glanced at my bedroom door fearfully. “I… I thought I heard someone.”

“Call the police,” Edel said immediately, voice stern. “Do you mean just outside your window? Or actually in the flat?”

I swallowed, gaze still fixed on the dark hallway beyond my bedroom door. “In the flat,” I whispered.

“*Scheisse.* Okay.” I heard Edel shifting. Their voice got fainter as they said, “Amir, get up. We need to go to mine.”

“No, it’s okay,” I blurted without thinking, already feeling guilty for waking them up at this time. “I—I think it was the TV next door.”

I had no idea why I said it. Why I lied. It had *not* been a TV. It had *not* been next door.

“Ari—”

“Honestly, I think I was half dreaming.” I laughed hoarsely, my throat dry. I didn’t even know why I was saying this. I *wanted* Edel to come here. I didn’t want to be alone in the flat. “I’ll go and look to make sure, but I’m pretty sure I was just—”

“Ari, don’t go out there!” Edel cried incredulously, their German accent thickening the words. “Not if you heard someone. Call the police and wait in your room. Or get out through your window if you can. We’ll—”

“Seriously, it’s fine.” I wiped my face and inched to the edge of the bed before standing up on legs that shook wildly. “I’m walking into the living room now.”

Having Edel’s soothing voice in my ear helped calm my nerves. The floor was cool under my bare feet as I stepped into the hallway and hesitantly tried the light switch. It worked, bathing the hallway in bright artificial light that made me wince and feel relieved all at once. My pyjamas stuck to my damp skin as I padded down the corridor to the living room, stopping on the way to turn on the bathroom light and check in there. Empty. I did the same with Edel’s room, poking my head in and sweeping my gaze around.

When I flicked the switch for the overhead lights in the living area, nothing happened, but the lights over the kitchen counters came on when I

tried the other one, and I exhaled shakily when I saw everything in its place. No one here.

"There's no one here." The relief was clear in my voice.

"Have you checked everywhere?" Edel's voice was a little muffled, and I knew that meant they were chewing their thumbnail anxiously. "What about the windows? Are any broken?"

"No." I hadn't bothered to draw the curtains after Theo left, which I probably should have. I took a hesitant step forward, my clammy feet sticking to the floor. "But… I think one of the lights in the living room has blown. I heard it pop."

I turned on the lamps, giving myself enough light to see the broken glass on the living room floor.

"Is the front door locked?"

I went to check, even though I remembered flipping the latch and sliding the chain across when Theo left. "Yeah, it's locked."

I was calming down, but my gaze still darted around as I slowly walked back to the living room. In my ear, I held Edel let out a shaky exhale.

"Are you *sure* there's no one there?"

"Yeah," I croaked, then cleared my throat. "I'll double check, but I'm pretty sure. I must have been dreaming."

"Stay on the phone while you check."

I smiled tiredly and kept the phone to my ear as I went through the whole flat methodically, checking all the windows and double checking the front door. I peered under Edel's bed, but a sharp pang of fear went through me as I did the same with mine, part of me expecting to see… something.

There was nothing. I was alone.

"I'm sorry for waking you up," I said ruefully to Edel as I went back into the kitchen to grab the dustpan and brush from under the sink.

I heard them cluck in my ear. "Don't be silly."

"I'll let you go. Tell Amir I'm sorry too."

"Amir is already snoring away. I know you're too tired to give me the details, but did the date go okay?"

I smiled, turning on speakerphone so I could set the phone on the coffee table. I carefully approached the broken glass from the lightbulb, kneeling down to sweep it up. "Yeah, it went well."

Edel let out a little grunt. "Well, that's good."

"I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

“Okay.” Edel fell silent for a moment before adding, “If you hear anything else, call me straight away, okay? Whatever time it is.”

I softened. “I will. Thanks, Edel.”

“Try and sleep, *ja*? Don’t let it scare you.”

“I won’t.” I stood up, holding the dustpan and brush. “Sleep well.”

“See you tomorrow.”

I saw the call disconnect and carried the dustpan over to the bin, dumping the glass shards inside. After grabbing my phone, I hesitated with my finger over the light switch on my way out. Casting a wary glance back into the empty room, I left the lights on.

CHAPTER

TEN

When I woke up the next morning, the entire night felt a bit like a fever dream. If it hadn't been for my sore throat and the broken lightbulb in the living room, I would've been inclined to dismiss it all.

I woke up achingly hard. After shuffling into the kitchen and gulping down a glass of water, feeling unusually thirsty, I got into the shower and stroked myself until I was shuddering and coming under the spray.

Only once I was towelling off my damp hair and getting dressed did I wonder if that was… kind of a weird thing to do, considering I'd been scared to death that a creepy stranger was in the flat last night. Why had I woken up so turned on?

Maybe my brain was just choosing to fixate on what Theo and I had done instead of that terrifying incident, especially as there hadn't even *been* anyone in here.

Except… I had definitely heard someone.

I could write off the shadow figure in my room as my eyes playing tricks on me—lights from outside casting weird shadows and making me see things. But I *had* heard a voice in the living room.

I knew I had, but even that didn't seem so terrifying in the light of day. It was bright out, the flat calm and peaceful. Morning sun streaked across my bedroom, and I sat in a warm patch at my dressing table while I plaited my damp hair back before doing my skincare routine.

It was my day off today, but I was a habitual early riser even if I'd gone to sleep late the night before. It was probably too early for me to text Edel

and ask what their plans were for the day—especially as they might be spending the day with Amir. I didn't want to disturb them again after my embarrassing phone call in the middle of the night.

As I was leaving my room after making my bed, there were three sharp raps at the front door. I paused in the hallway, wondering if that *was* Edel and they'd left their keys at Amir's. They'd done it a couple of times before.

I walked over and took the chain off the door, then flipped the lock and pulled it open with a smile.

There was no one there.

My smile slowly slid off my face as I poked my head out to look down the hallway, in case someone was walking away after realising they'd knocked on the wrong door or something.

The corridor was completely empty and silent.

I stood there for a few seconds, staring blankly at the empty spot in front of me.

Huh?

Unease made my skin prickle, and I stepped back to close the door, but the flat suddenly didn't feel quite so peaceful as it had just moments ago. It was like there was pressure at my back—the heat of something behind me, in here with me.

I spun around quickly, gaze slightly wild as I looked around, down the corridor into the main room of the flat, through my open bedroom door, into the dark bathroom, still steamy after my shower. The only sounds were the gentle drip of the shower, the hum of the fridge in the kitchen, the rumble of an engine as a car drove past outside.

I suddenly didn't want to be here anymore.

Speed walking into my bedroom, I grabbed some shoes and my phone, keys and bag before hurrying back to the front door, snatching up my jacket from the coat hooks as I passed them. I was panting lightly as I slipped into the hallway and locked the front door behind me, still clutching all my stuff. Only once the door was locked did I take a deep breath, setting my bag down so I could hurriedly tug on my sneakers and jacket, glad none of my neighbours were around to witness it.

You can go and buy a new lightbulb, I told myself as I slung my bag over my shoulder and stuffed my hands in my jacket pockets, walking quickly down the corridor. I tried to convince myself that everything was

fine—everything was normal—and I'd been planning to spend the day out anyway. Even though I hadn't.

It was easier when I pushed open the main doors of the building and stepped out into bright sunlight and cold air. Cars whizzed past, and a lady in a pink coat met my eye briefly as she pushed a pram along the pavement.

Normal. Everything's normal.

I let out a slow, steadying breath as I made my way down the front steps and started heading towards town. Even though it was daytime, with more people around, I didn't take the quicker route through the underpass. The encounter with that guy was still freaking me out.

Deciding to get coffee, I headed into one of the many chain shops in town. The florist shop was open today, so I didn't want to go to Holy Grind and have to pop in to see Inaya. I was too jittery and unsettled to have to act normal around my boss.

Luckily, it was still early enough that there was no queue, so I quickly ordered a double-espresso iced latte and stood to the side of the counter after paying. As I waited for the barista to make my drink, I pulled my phone out and saw that Edel had texted me.

Morning. How are you feeling?

I started typing back a reply: *All good. Sorry about last night. Although weirdly, someone knocked on the door this morning but there was no one th*

I stopped typing abruptly, staring down at my phone. Did that make me sound crazy? Was Edel going to read this and get concerned about me? First the weirdness last night, and now I was saying a ghost knocked at the door?

"Your drink's ready."

I jerked my head up at the sound of the barista's voice to see him give me a quick smile, pushing my drink across the counter before turning back to the machine.

I cleared my throat and pocketed my phone. "Thanks."

Grabbing my drink, I brought the straw to my lips as I headed outside. The coffee shop was in the town square, and it was still fairly empty seeing as most of the shops weren't open yet. Making my way over to the fountain in the centre, I sat down on the stone seating around its edge and pulled my phone back out.

Chewing on the cardboard straw anxiously, I deleted half my message to Edel and quickly typed out something that hopefully sounded more normal.

All good. Sorry about last night. In town running a few errands at the moment. Are you home tonight? Shall I get us something for dinner?

I didn't want to be alone in the flat tonight, but I didn't want to worry Edel any more than I already had. While I waited for them to reply, I opened up my conversation with Theo, my stomach fluttering for an entirely different reason.

Hey, I typed. *I had a really good time last night*.

After hitting send, I shoved back the brief, juvenile flash of fear that I was coming across as too eager. The guy had throatfucked me last night. If a simple text the morning after was enough to send him running, he wasn't worth my time.

My pulse leapt when my phone buzzed with an incoming text a second later, but it wasn't Theo—it was Edel replying to my message.

Don't be sorry. Are you sure you're okay?? I'm on my way home soon. I'll pick us up some dinner, don't worry xx

Relief settled over me like a comforting blanket. I could just wait in town until Edel was back. I was sure this uneasiness would pass, but right then I didn't want to be alone in the flat.

Before I could text Edel back thanking them and assuring them I was okay, Theo's name flashed up on my screen.

He was calling me.

Nervous excitement burned away any lingering disquiet in an instant. Setting my drink down on the seat beside me, I answered and brought the phone to my ear. "Hi."

"Hi."

The sound of his deep, gravelly voice brought back memories of the night before in a heated rush. His mouth against mine, beard tickling me. His big hands against my bare skin. The smell of him, like burning wood. The weight of his cock on my tongue, hitting the back of my throat. Him calling me a good boy. Sweetheart. Telling me I wasn't allowed to come until he did.

I shivered, hunching forward and resting my elbows on my thighs as I stared down at the dirty ground between my sneakers, the start of a grin dancing at the corners of my mouth.

"I had a really good time last night too," he said, his voice a low rumble in my ear. I gnawed at my lower lip to try and suppress my smile.

“How are you doing?” he asked, his voice relaxing the tension in my muscles, which was a weird reaction for me to have considering we didn’t even really know each other that well. “You’re up early for a Sunday.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of an early bird.” I chuckled, picking at a loose thread on the hem of my baggy shirt. “I’m just in town running a few errands while it’s quiet. I, um—I’m guessing you’re a morning person too?”

“Yeah, I don’t need all that much sleep.” I heard Theo moving down the phone, his voice getting a little echoey as he walked somewhere. “I’m just finishing up at the gym. So you’re in town? So am I.”

My stomach squeezed. “Yeah, I am.”

“Want to get some breakfast?”

“Yes,” I said quickly, hoping my goofy smile wasn’t too obvious in my voice. “Sure. That sounds nice.”

“I just need to have a shower, then I can come and meet you. Whereabouts are you?”

Lust briefly whited out my vision as I imagined Theo all sweaty after a workout, stripping down to nothing and getting into the shower. I bit down on my inner cheek hard.

“In the square. By the fountain.” I picked up my drink and took a sip. “I can wait here.”

“I’ll be ten minutes. That okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” I was grinning so wide my cheeks hurt. “See you soon.”

I was in an exponentially better mood as we hung up and I quickly texted Edel back, telling them everything was great and that I’d give them the details of my date with Theo later. Obviously not *all* the details—Edel and I were close, but I didn’t think they’d particularly want to hear about me getting my throat rammed by a big pierced cock on our living room sofa the night before.

Sitting back, I pulled my feet up onto the edge of the seat and sipped my drink as I waited for Theo, absently scrolling through social media on my phone.

“Hey.”

I jumped when the low voice sounded directly to my left a short while later, almost dropping my phone. Theo shot me a brief grin when my head snapped around towards him, his arm casually draping along the back of the stone seat behind me.

“Jesus, you snuck up on me.” I pressed a hand to my heart briefly and laughed. “How do you move so quietly?”

He shrugged one shoulder, drawing my gaze down his frame. I was kind of disappointed to see that he wasn’t wearing sweats, even though I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be able to control myself if he ever did. He didn’t have a jacket on, no doubt still running hot after his workout, and his long-sleeved shirt was made of a thin enough fabric that I could see his nipples through it. His pierced nipples. My gut cramped with longing and arousal.

I jerked my gaze back up to meet his, and it felt as natural as breathing to lean in. Theo was already doing the same, and our lips met in a kiss that was somehow exhilaratingly new and easy with growing familiarity at the same time.

There wasn’t really anyone around, so I didn’t feel too self-conscious about our PDA as our lips opened up and our tongues glided briefly together. I shivered at the rasp of his tongue bar, the taste of him reminding me of the night before, already becoming wonderfully familiar.

I blinked dazedly as we pulled back, clearing my throat and looking down at the drink still clutched in my hand.

“Want a sip?” I asked, lifting the cup.

Theo’s mouth quirked at the corner. He dutifully leant forward and took a sip through the straw, but wrinkled his nose as he pulled back.

“I’m French, so I can be a bit of a puritan about coffee,” he told me dryly. I hungrily absorbed the tiny scrap of information he’d offered about himself.

“You’re French? You don’t have an accent.” I flushed, wondering if that had been an ignorant thing to say. I was half Finnish but didn’t have an accent either.

“I haven’t lived there for a long time,” Theo said easily, pulling a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket.

I gave him a playful nudge with my elbow. “That reminds me, I haven’t asked you how old you are.”

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye as he lit a cigarette, sucking in a deep drag before pulling it away from his lips. “Forty-one.”

I nodded, watching him exhale a long stream of grey smoke.

“I should’ve guessed when you called me instead of texting me back,” I teased, then added, “I’m twenty-six.”

He brought the cigarette back up to his lips as his head turned toward me, dark eyes crinkling with humour. “Am I too old for you, dimples?”

I snorted with laughter, leaning into the warmth of his body. “No.”

He shot me a brief grin, revealing that little gap between his front teeth that made me melt, and dipped his head to kiss my cheek. I didn’t even mind the sharp smell of cigarette smoke that clung to his beard.

“Good.” He pulled back. “Shall we go get some breakfast?”

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I blurted out after the waitress had left our table, having just delivered our food.

We were sitting at a table outside a little café because it was already unseasonably warm for early March. Plus, Theo would no doubt want to smoke after eating. Most of the other tables were empty, an older couple at the opposite end of the terrace the only other people out here.

Theo's dark brows pulled into a little frown as he glanced at me, long fingers unwrapping the napkin from around his cutlery. A plate of Eggs Florentine sat waiting in front of him, whereas I'd gone for pancakes with maple syrup and bacon.

"Ghosts? Why?" He paused and looked at me properly. "Are you okay?"

I flushed, feeling childish. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry, forget it."

"No." He leaned closer, reaching over to tangle his fingers through mine. His gaze was strangely intense. "What made you ask that?"

I gnawed at my lower lip, staring back at him, wondering if he was going to think I was crazy.

"I, um, thought I heard something in the flat last night." My laugh was a touch too forced. "But I'm sure it was just people outside or something."

Theo's dark eyes flared.

"What did you hear?" he asked sharply.

I blinked in surprise at his tone, like he was taking it more seriously than I was. "Uh… like a voice. A deep voice, speaking in a language I couldn't understand. And, um… I thought I saw something in my room."

I tugged my hand free from his to rub anxiously at my face, feeling flustered. “God, sorry, I sound ridiculous. Forget I said anything.”

“You don’t. Tell me.”

I lowered my hand and looked at him. Theo stared back, eyes still weirdly intense and fixed on me, his food forgotten.

“What did you see?” he urged when I said nothing.

“I—It looked like something was standing in the corner of my room. And then it… it moved to the end of my bed. It looked like it had… horns or something.” I laughed nervously. “And then I heard a voice in the living room, and then it stopped, and… all the lights in the flat came on before turning back off all at once.”

God, saying it out loud was making the anxiety rise back up inside me. I let out a shaky breath and grabbed my juice just so my hands had something to do, taking a sip and avoiding Theo’s gaze.

I could feel him still watching me. He was silent for a long moment, then slowly sat back in his seat. “I believe you.”

My eyes darted to him. “Really?”

“Yes.” He picked up his knife and fork calmly, but his face looked tense. “There’s stuff we shouldn’t mess with.”

Anxiety twisted my gut. “I haven’t messed with anything—”

“No, you haven’t.” He set his knife back down and reached over to take my hand again, giving it a gentle squeeze. “But everyone should be careful and take shit like that seriously.”

His dark eyes bored into mine. “Take it seriously, okay? Don’t… don’t do anything stupid like get a Ouija board or ask it to prove that it’s real. Ignore it. Don’t react to it. Don’t acknowledge it.”

“I—” I blinked, shocked by his intensity. “Um, okay. I won’t.”

“Promise me.”

What the fuck?

“I… I promise,” I said cautiously, staring at him. “Have you… Do you have experience with stuff like that, then?”

“Yes.” He sat back and picked up his knife again, finally starting to eat. “Your food’s getting cold, sweetheart.”

I slowly picked up my knife and fork and did the same. The food settled my stomach, reminding me of how little sleep I’d had. I didn’t know if I looked tired, because Theo offered me some of his coffee, which I sipped

gratefully. I gave him a piece of bacon in exchange for it, smiling when he crunched down and sighed.

"You really do like food, huh?" I teased, pushing my plate towards him so he could eat my last pancake.

He gave a little huff of amusement. "Yeah, hence why I can't ever shift my gut even though I go to the gym a few times a week."

My eyes went heavy-lidded with arousal as I stared at him. "I love your body."

I immediately flushed, glancing around sheepishly to make sure the waitress hadn't been approaching. Theo's gaze darkened as he watched me. Reaching across the small table, he curled long fingers around my wrist and lifted my hand to press a kiss there. I shivered, the skin sensitive to the tickle of his beard.

Leaning back, he pulled out his cigarettes and lit one now we had finished eating, sighing once again in pleasure as he sucked in a deep lungful of toxic smoke.

The waitress appeared and cleared our plates, refilling Theo's coffee before she vanished again. Over the empty table, he reached out and took my hand.

"I'm sorry you had a bad night after I left." His fingers squeezed mine. "And I'm sorry I couldn't stay. I can't leave Athena for that long."

"That's okay." I smiled at him. "I wouldn't expect you to leave your dog overnight."

Theo's dark eyes crinkled in the corners with a tiny smile. "Want to walk her with me today? Might take your mind off things."

I perked up instantly. "Really?"

"Yeah. If you don't mind coming all the way out to my place." He paused. "Or I guess I could go get her and bring her back so we can take her somewhere closer—"

"No, it's okay," I interrupted eagerly. "We can go to yours. Is there somewhere you normally walk her?"

"Well, I own a lot of land around my house." Theo shrugged as he stubbed out his cigarette. "I like my privacy. So I tend to just take her over those fields. That way she can be off the lead and roam around. But it's nice. There's some woodland. A meadow."

"That sounds lovely." I grinned at him. "I'd love to. So you live in the countryside?"

“Yeah. Middle of nowhere.” Theo picked up his cup and drained the last of his coffee. “I’ll go pay, then we can head off.”

“You don’t have to pay for me,” I said quickly, reaching down to fumble with my bag on the floor.

Theo shook his head, already standing up and pulling his wallet out of his pocket. He leaned down to kiss my cheek.

“I asked you to join me for breakfast.” Warm fingers danced briefly over my chin, his thumb brushing the corner of my mouth. “I’m paying.”

Then he was gone, heading inside to pay at the counter. I quickly typed out a text to Edel, letting them know where I was going and that I’d be home later for dinner. They replied a minute later with, *Guess the date went VERY well then* and a winky face. I smiled as I stuffed my phone back in my jacket pocket.

I stood up when I saw Theo making his way back outside. He either didn’t notice or didn’t care about the middle-aged couple who shot him odd looks as they passed him on their way in, their eyes lingering on his beard and piercings. I got those looks too, whenever I wore make-up or clothes deemed feminine.

When he reached me, I couldn’t help but lean up to kiss him. I was already kind of addicted to the bristly but gentle rub of his beard against my skin. “Thank you for breakfast.”

His warm hand settled on the back of my neck as he kissed me again. “You’re welcome.”

We were getting disdainful looks from the old couple, but I ignored them as Theo wrapped his arm around my shoulders and led me away from the café.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

"Jesus," I muttered as the car followed the curve of the long drive we were on and a house came into view up ahead between the trees.

It wasn't a gaudy mega-mansion or eye-wateringly contemporary building that stuck out like a sore thumb in the rural setting, which I'd been half-expecting. It was a big, ornate Georgian manor house made of pale stone, with airy panelled windows and a tall front door centred between thick pillars. But what really grabbed me was the swathe of blooming wisteria blanketing the front of the house. Fat lilac flowers dripped from pale branches, and I could practically smell their sweet scent from the car.

Theo somehow sensed my excitement. He glanced over with a cocked brow before shifting his hand off the gear stick to palm my thigh. "You like it?"

"It's gorgeous," I gushed, tangling my fingers with his as I leaned forward in my seat to get a better look. "How long have you lived here?"

Theo took his time answering, lifting his hand off my leg to change gear as the driveway widened at the front of the house. "A while."

After he parked haphazardly on the drive, I climbed out of the car and frowned up at the wisteria. It was still sunny, and I could see the clusters of flowers moving gently in the breeze. Its musky, unique fragrance drifted over, almost overpoweringly strong.

"Wisteria doesn't bloom this early," I said as Theo walked round the car to join me. "Do you feed it something special?"

"Uh, I'm not much of a plant person. Except herbs." Theo shrugged. "I have a gardener who comes once a week. Maybe she does something to it."

“Maybe, but…” Glancing over at Theo, I decided to drop it. I didn’t want to seem weird by fixating on flowers, and his expression was decidedly uninterested as he looked up at the wisteria.

He glanced down at me with a tiny wry smile. “Want me to show you the garden before we go in?”

I laughed. “No, that’s okay. You can show me when we walk Athena.”

Speaking of whom, I could hear a deep, excited bark coming from inside the house. I followed Theo to the front door, the gravel crunching under our boots and making Athena even more frantic.

“She jumps up.” He glanced over at me as he unlocked the door. “Never been able to break her of the habit. Do you mind?”

“No, that’s fine,” I said eagerly, already gleefully anticipating being tackled by a big ball of fluff.

A furry mass of mottled grey and white shot out past us as soon as Theo opened the door, before Athena doubled back and jumped up at her owner excitedly.

“Hi, baby.” He scratched behind her ears, and her tongue lolled out in pleasure.

Finally seeming to notice me, she bounded over and reared up to try and reach my face, tongue licking frantically in the air. I laughed, smoothing my palms down her coarse, thick coat, wrinkling my nose as her hot breath wafted over me.

“Hi, Athena.”

She jumped down and barked, curled tail jerking in an overexcited wag. When I crouched down to her level, she immediately moved closer and leaned her weight heavily against me, panting as I scratched at her side.

“She loves people. Not so fond of other dogs,” Theo told me, a hint of affection in his voice as he watched us.

“Oh, so I’m not special, huh?” I gave her a scratch under her muzzle. “You’re like this with everyone.”

Glancing up to smile at Theo, I finally took in the front hall. It was big and airy, with black and white tiles on the floor and antique furniture. Directly ahead was an open set of double doors leading into a big sitting room, and I could see even bigger French doors within that opened out onto a stone patio.

The door to our right was closed, but on the left was a long, wide corridor which seemed to lead to a bright, more modern-looking kitchen.

I stood up as Athena bounded off towards a tennis ball at the other end of the hall, still full of excited energy.

"Your home is beautiful," I told Theo.

He gave me a lopsided smile. "Yeah, I like it. Want a tour?"

"Can Athena wait that long?" I grinned at the dog who was now waiting impatiently in front of us, her chest dropped low to the ground, butt in the air and tail wagging madly as she looked pointedly between us and the tennis ball.

Theo chuckled, scooping up the ball—managing to grab it before Athena as she lunged forward—and nodding towards the sitting room ahead of us. "We'll go out through the garden so you can have a look. I'll give you a tour when we get back."

"Sounds good." I followed him into the sitting room, trying not to gawk as I looked around. A huge Persian rug covered the tiles in the centre of the big room, ornate sofas placed around its edge.

At one end of the room was a more casual seating arrangement with a big flat screen TV, and at the other, a grand piano sat next to a large fireplace with recessed bookshelves either side of it. Huge windows lined the back wall, providing breathtaking views of the sprawling gardens beyond the wide stone patio. Thick forest loomed in the distance, and I wondered if that was the edge of Theo's property, or if he owned the woods too. He'd said he owned a lot of land.

When we stepped outside into the cool air and bright sunlight, Theo didn't bother locking the door behind us. He flung the tennis ball out past the patio, and I watched Athena tear after it.

"Are you going to lock up?"

He glanced over and shrugged. "No one around for miles. I never bother."

"Oh, okay." I let out a nervous laugh and followed him down the wide steps onto the grass.

I was instantly distracted by the garden around us. The lawn was dotted with fruit trees that were just starting to blossom, and interspersed with thick bushes. I could spot spikes of pink bergenias jutting up from wide flat leaves, delicate camellias in blood red and white, dusky purple hellebores and clusters of star-shaped Daphnes.

A blanket of daffodils swayed gently behind a garden shed on our right, and to our left was a long pool covered with thick green plastic. Glancing

behind us, I noticed thick trellising acting as shade for a seating area on the patio, covered in dainty honeysuckle. Beyond it, to the side of the house, were huge stone planters that looked to be filled with herbs. The air smelled sweet and fresh, like the grass had recently been mown.

"This is beautiful," I said as Theo picked up the ball Athena dropped at his feet, throwing it again.

He glanced over at me once Athena had raced off. "Glad you like it."

Our bodies instinctively moved closer as we walked slowly through the garden and into the more open fields beyond. When Theo twined his fingers through mine, sweet warmth pierced my chest.

"Have you always liked flowers?" he asked.

I chuckled. "Yeah. Went through a phase of picking any I found to put in my hair when I was little."

His mouth quirked into a tiny smile. "Bet you looked cute."

I made a face. "Everyone always said I looked angelic anyway. The flowers probably didn't help."

"You still do." He chuckled when I shot him a mock glare. "Okay, you don't."

I leaned briefly against his arm as we walked. "So where's your property line?"

"Past the woods. It's only small, and I sometimes get people walking their dogs in there anyway." He shrugged, not seeming to care. "There's a lake as well, but I'd say it's more like a big pond."

"Bet Athena loves being able to roam so far."

"Yeah. She has a lot of energy. Sometimes even two long walks a day isn't enough." He glanced over with a lopsided smile. "Hope you're up for a long walk."

I grinned back, wanting to draw out my time with him as much as possible. "Sounds good to me."

My legs were aching a little as we started heading back to the house, having crossed two fields along the edge of the woods. I wasn't used to

navigating bumpy, uneven ground, more accustomed to level pavement and everything being only a few minutes' walk away.

I was pleasantly tired, my cheeks flushed, hand still firmly tucked in Theo's as Athena bounded ahead of us, seeming no less energetic than when we'd set off. She circled us in big, wide loops, barking excitedly and racing back when Theo chucked the tennis ball for her one more time.

I glanced back to watch her snatch it the moment it landed on the grass, but my eyes snagged on a tall figure standing just inside the forest treeline.

"Think you've got some of those dog walkers you mentioned earlier," I told Theo, wondering if it didn't creep him out to have people wandering through the woods behind his house.

When he looked back, I tried to find the person again to point them out, but they'd already walked off. Athena returned with her ball, seeming to understand that her walk was over, because she kept it in her mouth this time and trotted obediently beside Theo.

We traipsed up the stone steps onto the patio, and I quickly checked my trainers for mud before following Theo inside.

"Let's make sure you've got some fresh water, huh?" he told Athena, then looked at me. "Want to see the kitchen?"

I nodded eagerly, following him back into the hallway and to the right, down the long, wide corridor. I glanced over at the staircase to our left as we passed it, and my skin warmed as I tried to imagine what Theo's bedroom looked like, then my gaze shifted to the door tucked right in the corner, half in shadow.

It was different to all the others. It looked far older, made of weathered, cracked wood with heavy iron fixtures, its top arching into a sharp point.

"What's in there?" I asked, pointing at it.

Theo stopped and glanced over. "Wine cellar."

Noticing the thick, heavy padlock on the door, I chuckled and raised a brow. "You take keeping your wine safe very seriously."

He flashed me a little grin, showing off the gap between his front teeth. "French, remember?"

I laughed, tangling my fingers through his and letting him lead me down the hallway until we emerged into a bright, airy kitchen. It looked more modern than the rest of the house, with gleaming countertops and stainless-steel appliances polished to a high shine. An island dominated the centre of

the room, seating on one side and a wide induction hob on the other, beneath a cast-iron hanging rack laden with steel and copper pots and pans.

"This is gorgeous," I said, trailing my fingers over the island countertop as Theo made his way to the sink to wash his hands and fill Athena's water bowl.

"Gonna tease me for how seriously I take my cooking too?" he asked, glancing back with a wry smile.

I laughed and said in an innocent tone, "Of course not."

Theo wandered back from the sink, drying his hands on a tea towel before leaning his elbows on the island across from me.

"Want to stay for dinner?" he asked.

Pure longing shot through me. I wanted nothing more than to stay here a little longer in this beautiful house, this idyllic setting, and watch Theo cook, moving around comfortably in his own space.

"I'd love to, but Edel's already bought dinner for us." I chewed my lip. "Maybe I could—"

"No, don't bail on them." Theo straightened up. "We can do it another night."

I grinned at him, moving round the island so I could slide my arms around his waist. "Does that mean I'm invited back? I passed the Athena test?"

Theo snorted, settling his hands on my shoulders before sliding them down my arms. "Not much of a test. Athena can't distinguish between a knife-wielding serial killer and a judge."

I raised a brow. "That's… kind of unsettling."

He grunted. "Doesn't work anyway. Half of judges are corrupt."

I laughed and stepped back. "Yeah, *that* was what was wrong with that sentence."

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Inaya could instantly tell that I was in a fantastic mood when I walked into work on Tuesday morning. She relentlessly questioned me until I gave in and told her about my date with Theo—two dates—leaving out the dirty details, even though she asked for them.

Edel had done the same when I'd gotten home on Sunday. Theo had stopped at the big hardware shop on the way to mine so I could run in and buy a lightbulb to replace the broken one in the living room. He'd dropped me home with a final, long kiss in his car and a murmured promise that we'd speak soon.

The weird events in the flat felt distant already, thanks to the endorphin high I was riding. I slept well, maybe because Edel was home and I wasn't alone in the flat, but I didn't see or hear anything unusual.

Over the following week, Theo and I talked constantly through text or on the phone. We met up several times for lunch at Holy Grind, and on the following Saturday we went out for dinner again. He'd sucked me off in the backseat of his car before he left, because we could see Edel and Amir watching TV in the living room through the windows. The cover of night shielded us from any eyes, though I'd felt an exhilarating rush of fear-spiked adrenaline when a couple had walked along the pavement behind Theo's car. I'd had to clamp my hand over my mouth to stop from whimpering too loudly as his fingertip teased my hole while he moaned low around my cock.

The police never called me with any updates about my near-mugging, so I pushed it from my mind and counted myself lucky it hadn't been worse. Maybe the guy had been high, or drunk, and had just thought he'd

seen someone behind me. I still didn't walk that way home again, not wanting to tempt fate.

It was the following Thursday, after my third date with Theo, and I was leaning on the counter with the shop phone pressed to my ear, on a call with one of our suppliers to place an order for the following week.

I was waiting on hold while they checked their scheduled shipments, tinny music playing in my ear as I fiddled with a roll of twine. When my phone vibrated in the front pocket of my apron, I reached in to pull it out.

My mouth spread into a wide smile when I saw a text from Theo. Unlocking my phone, I opened it up.

Guessing you're at work today?

Tucking the shop phone under my chin to hold it to my ear, I quickly typed back. *Yep. Are you at your office today or working from home?*

He had an office in town that he sometimes worked from, when he needed to get out of the house for a while or Athena was being too distracting, he'd said.

When he replied a minute later though, he didn't answer my question.

Shame. I was just thinking about getting you in a bed and sliding my cock inside you.

I went hot all over as I stared down at the words. My mouth went dry and I nearly dropped the shop phone still tucked under my chin.

The tinny music in my ear suddenly cut off with a click, but I barely noticed it. "That order's all placed for you," a cheerful voice said. "We'll deliver it on Monday morning at the usual time."

A second text from Theo came through.

I'm in my office, already hard thinking about the sounds you'll make as I fuck you.

Fuck. My fingers were sweaty as I gripped my phone too tight, cock stiffening fast in my jeans as the image of it flashed in my mind.

I jumped when the bell above the door tinkled as Inaya walked in from her lunch break, smiling at me as she started shrugging off her coat. I jumped again when a voice sounded in my ear.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

Clearing my throat, I quickly stuffed my phone back in my apron and croaked, "Yep, sorry. Uh, great. Thanks. See you Monday."

I hung up the phone and placed it on the counter with lightly trembling fingers. Lust coursed through my veins, and all I could picture was me and

Theo writhing together in my bed, naked, bodies pressed tight.

"Are you alright, darling?" Inaya asked as she rounded the counter. She frowned at me, placing a gentle hand on my arm. "You look very flushed."

I licked my lips, preparing myself to brush it off and tell her I was fine. Instead, I heard myself say, "Actually, I don't feel very well."

Her kind face creased with concern, and she raised a hand to rest it on my forehead. "You *are* warm. Darling, go home. I'll be fine here."

"I—" Guilt gurgled through me, but it wasn't strong enough to overpower the throbbing need to see Theo. Now. "Are you sure? I don't want to leave you—"

"If you're poorly, you must go home and rest. I'll be fine, Ari. We're not busy today."

I licked my lips and nodded, already reaching back to untie my apron. "Okay. If you don't mind."

"Of course not." Inaya followed me to the back office and watched from the doorway as I collected my stuff, transferring my phone from my apron pocket to my jacket. "And if you still don't feel well tomorrow, just text me in the morning."

I felt awful for lying, but I just gave her a weak smile. "Thanks, Inaya."

"Hot tea and get yourself into bed." She followed me back out into the shop. "Or get your strapping Bluebeard to bring you some soup."

I cleared my throat, keeping my head down as I pulled open the shop door and mumbled, "Yeah, maybe."

It was bright and sunny as I made my way down the street, walking quickly. I'd never skived off from work at the florist shop before. I loved it too much to want to. But all I could think about was Theo's big body covering me, his cock pounding me so hard I forgot my own name.

I shuddered, pulling out my phone and fumbling to type out a text.

Meet me at mine in fifteen minutes.

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I kept my head down and walked even faster. It felt like everyone I passed knew what I was doing—that I had ducked out of work to go home and get fucked in the middle of the day.

I knew Edel was at work, but I was still relieved to find the flat empty and quiet when I stepped through the front door, already breathless, my heart pounding. Quickly shedding my bag and jacket, I walked into my bedroom and tugged off my boots, wondering if I'd have time to get changed and maybe put on something nicer before Theo got here—

Three sharp raps sounded at the door, making my heart leap into my throat.

I barely had time to get the door open before he was on me, clasping my face between warm hands and thrusting his tongue into my mouth. I moaned in delighted surprise and pulled him into the flat, hearing him kick the door shut behind him.

I was already breathing fast by the time we broke apart, and my cock lurched in my jeans when I saw that Theo was wearing an immaculate dark grey three-piece suit. Fuck, he looked so sexy, and he knew I thought so judging by the wry smile he aimed at me.

"Thought it'd be a good day to text you that—"

I lunged at him before he could finish speaking, trying to scale his big body as my tongue tangled feverishly with his. Theo groaned and hefted me into his arms, taking a few steps deeper into the flat.

"Bedroom?" he rasped between kisses.

"First—" I attacked his neck with lips and teeth, Theo's fingers tightening on me when I bit down. "First door on the right."

I felt him moving, and then he was depositing me on the mattress. I knelt on the edge as he stood beside the bed and rucked up my shirt, our lips only breaking apart to get it over my head.

I couldn't stop kissing him. My fingers fumbled with my fly, and then he was pushing me back until my head hit the pillows and yanking my jeans and underwear down my legs in forceful tugs, ripping my socks off along the way.

It took only a second for me to realise that I was completely naked in front of him for the first time, but I didn't have long to dwell on it before Theo was kneeling at the foot of the bed and sliding his big tattooed hands up my calves, still fully dressed.

His dark eyes flared as he took me in, long fingers cupping the backs of my knees and spreading my legs so he could move higher between them. He leaned down and pressed a tender kiss to the inside of my left knee, then another higher up. My cock jumped against my belly, drawing his eyes there in an instant. His gaze stayed fixed on my dick, watching it twitch as his lips and tongue trailed higher before he grazed his teeth over my inner thigh, exhilaratingly close to my balls.

I gasped, thighs twitching. He did it again a little harder, eyes growing heavy-lidded as he groaned.

“Y-yeah—bite me,” I breathed, squirming with restless arousal.

Theo’s dark eyes flashed as he grinned up at me, looking like a hungry wolf. He sank his teeth back into my inner thigh even harder, hard enough to leave a mark, making my hips jerk as my breath escaped me in a frantic rush.

He trailed his mouth higher, the bristles of his beard tickling my balls. He gave the head of my stiff dick a single slow suck before he was moving up, dropping wet, licking kisses over my stomach and chest, pausing to take a nipple gently between his teeth.

“F-fuck.” I ran my hands feverishly over his wide shoulders, burying them in his hair and tugging his bun loose.

He nuzzled my neck and jaw before pulling back to give me a wry smile. “Want me to leave the suit on?”

I bit my lip, gaze trailing down his sharply dressed frame. The temptation was great, but…

“No, I want to see all of you,” I panted, already trying to shove his jacket off his shoulders.

He huffed in amusement then leaned back before climbing off the bed to start getting undressed. Watching him unknot the tie and pull it free from his neck was its own kind of foreplay, and my cock jerked on my stomach as I stared at him, knowing my expression was embarrassingly ardent.

After letting his jacket and waistcoat drop to the ground, he began undoing the buttons on his shirt with long, tattooed fingers. My eyes were fixed intently on the tanned skin dusted with dark hair that was revealed.

“Spread your legs for me,” he rasped, standing at the foot of the bed, looming over me just like I’d imagined on our first date. “Show me everything, Ari.”

I shuddered, sliding my heels apart over the cool sheets. Theo groaned as he shrugged out of his shirt, and my eyes greedily took in his tattooed arms, hair-dusted chest and stomach, his pierced nipples.

“Look at you. So fucking perfect.” He began unbuttoning his trousers, the thick length of his cock already straining under the fabric. “Show me where you want my cock.”

I nearly whined as I brought my knees up and rested my feet flat on the bed, legs spread wide. I tilted my hips, and couldn’t help but draw one trembling hand down. My fingers trailed over my tight sac before dipping lower, and I moaned as I dragged a fingertip lightly over my hole.

“Fuck,” Theo bit out, shoving down his trousers and boxer briefs together, his cock bucking as it swung free.

I heard the thud of his shoes hitting the floor, and then he was crawling over me, completely naked, pausing to leave a savage bite on my hip that had me jerking with a clipped moan.

His mouth crashed to mine, tongue thrusting hungrily, dominating me, his beard rasping roughly over my skin. All my limbs twined around him, clinging on as our cocks rubbed together between us, the slick tips leaving a mess on my stomach. His piercing dragged against my sensitive cockhead, making me moan desperately into the kiss.

I had just enough sense left to break the kiss and reach over to my bedside table, yanking open the drawer and fumbling inside for lube and a condom. When I couldn’t find either by touch alone, I groaned in frustration and rolled onto my side, Theo lifting off me with a breathless chuckle.

His warm hand slid over my hip as I finally managed to locate them. Then he was urging me onto my belly, and my cock leapt against the mattress as I set the lube and condom packet on the nightstand with trembling fingers.

Theo nudged my knees apart with his, long fingers curling round my hips and lifting them, presenting myself to him. I panted, my cheek squashed against the pillow and fists gripping the covers tight. I watched through lust-glazed eyes as Theo’s tattooed hand appeared, grabbing the condom and lube.

There was the click of the tube cap opening, and then I was shuddering hard as slippery fingertips trailed lightly back and forth over my taint, sparking nerve endings to life. They circled my hole, making my hips tilt back even more, sinking my chest into the mattress.

Theo reached up between my legs and gripped my arm, drawing it down. A dollop of cool lube landed on my fingers, making my eyes pop open.

“Get yourself ready for me.” His voice was so low and gravelly, and I could hear the slide of skin on skin as he stroked his cock. “I want to watch.”

Oh fuck. I licked my dry lips and reached between my legs, smoothing the lube over my hole. I shifted my shoulder lower so I could reach better, my breath catching when I started to slide my middle finger inside.

“Fuck.” Theo’s free hand palmed my ass, fingers digging in tight. “That’s it. Good boy.”

I whimpered, sliding my finger as deep as I could from this angle, my lashes fluttering from the teasing sensation. It wasn’t long before I was pushing in a second, my hips trying to rock, but my arm couldn’t stretch any further. When I sank a third trembling finger inside, I whined and heard Theo hiss, his splayed fingers gripping me hard.

“Good boy,” he rasped again, making my cock drool where it was pressed against the inside of my wrist. “Look at this hole getting nice and open for me.”

“Theo,” I whimpered, my hips bucking and dislodging my fingers.

He groaned, tilting my hips back up. My thighs trembled, wet fingers gripping the duvet cover tight.

“Stay just like that.” He leaned down and kissed the small of my back. “Don’t move.”

I was panting hard, my cheek still pressed to the pillow. I tilted my head down so I could watch him as he sat back to roll the condom on, the light glinting over the heavy watch on his wrist.

The sight of his hands on his thick cock made me whimper again, my hole clenching needily around nothing. Theo noticed, and he flashed me a wolfish grin as he finished rolling on the condom and slicked it up with more lube.

“You want my dick, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” I croaked.

“You want to get fucked hard?”

I sucked in a shaky breath. “Yes.”

“Think you can handle it?”

That made me glare back at him with impatience, and he chuckled as he moved closer and grasped my hips. My eyes fluttered shut when the slick, heavy weight of him slid over my hole, the warmth of his cock permeating through the condom.

My breath caught from the blunt pressure against my hole. Heart hammering, I bore down and winced at the sharp sting as his cockhead popped inside. Theo groaned, hands sliding round to splay over my ass, spreading me wider. I could feel his gaze on where we were joined.

“Faster,” I mumbled as he sank inside in slow increments.

His chuckle was strained. “Don’t want to hurt you, dimples.”

I groaned, clutching the duvet tighter and burying my face in the pillow. “You won’t!”

His hips finally met my ass, and I moaned in relief at the feel of his dick fully inside me. He retreated, and then he was surging forward in a rush, slamming his cock back inside. I shouted in pleasured shock, arms lifting to curl my fingers around the headboard.

Hands gripping my waist hard, Theo started up a brutal pace. I choked out a moan, tensing my thighs to keep myself in place, my mouth opening around my gasping breaths. Pleasure pounded through me with every smack of his hips, the frantic sound filling the room over his grunts and my increasingly loud moans.

I let the jarring bliss wash over me, eyes sliding shut and brows pinching as I took every heavy thrust of his cock. It was *perfect*. Especially when Theo’s hands slid down, curving around my hipbones and tugging me back into every hard thrust.

He let out a long, low groan, and the unsteadiness in the sound made me want to preen. I flexed my hips back, then quickly lifted myself onto shaky arms as his hand slid up my spine.

“P-pull my hair,” I gasped, lifting my heavy head.

Theo groaned, wrapping my hair around his fist and craning my neck back, pulling my throat tight.

“*Yes*.” I swallowed convulsively, eyes squeezing shut. “Don’t stop—don’t stop—”

“Fuck,” Theo gritted out, fingers tightening, making my scalp tingle with the blissful melding of pain and pleasure.

His cock slid firmly over my prostate with each thrust, drawing choked moans out of me. I whined when he released my hair, but then his hand was sliding around my throat, gripping lightly as he leaned down to cover my body. His fist planted on the mattress beside me, and the tickle of his beard over my sensitive skin made me shudder.

Teeth sank into my shoulder before he licked away the sting. “You’re taking my dick so good, sweetheart.”

“Fuck,” I sobbed out, my Adam’s apple bobbing against his palm when I swallowed. My head felt too heavy, and only his gentle grip around my throat was keeping me from collapsing face first into the pillow.

“H-harder,” I rasped, voice hoarse, and then I heard myself say, “Choke me.”

Theo's hips stuttered before slowing. "Choke you?"

"Yes!" I rocked back onto his dick feverishly, feeling hot and sweaty all over, hair hanging in my face. "P-please. Please, Theo."

He groaned and kissed my shoulder. "Grab my wrist if you need me to stop, okay?"

I nodded frantically, and he gave me another sharp bite that made me jolt.

"Say it, Ari. Say the words."

"I'll—" I swallowed, my throat dry, panting. "I'll grab your wrist if I need you to stop."

I could feel the hesitation in him for just a second, then he murmured, "Good boy."

Hips speeding back up, jerking me on my hands and knees, he tightened the fingers around my throat. A slow, steady increase in pressure, his palm pushing uncomfortably into my Adam's apple and making me try to swallow. Then it started cutting off my air, and my eyes rolled back in my skull as tingles of bliss washed over my whole frame.

I transferred my weight to one unsteady arm as my hand shot down to fist my weeping cock. It was painfully hard, the first touch making me let out a garbled choke as Theo's long fingers gripped my throat tight.

I could feel my face getting red and hot from the lack of air, hair sticking to my damp temples. My thighs started to shake until it felt like I wouldn't be able to hold myself up anymore. Theo's cock pounded inside me brutally, exactly as I needed, and my entire body went bowstring taut as cum boiled up the length of my cock.

I jerked like I'd been struck by lightning when the orgasm hit, my hand shaking around my spurting cock. Black spots danced in my vision before it winked out entirely for a split second, and when Theo's hand loosened around my throat, I sucked in a long, gasping breath. The arm holding me up buckled and I collapsed onto the mattress, only my backside still raised in the air for Theo's pounding thrusts.

I moaned hoarsely as my hips spasmed, and I finally released my pulsing cock to reach lower, fingers fumbling to grab Theo's balls and squeeze them less than gently. I needed to feel him come, needed him to break apart as intensely as I had.

He shouted, his hips stuttering before he slammed them forward one last time. I could feel the base of his cock flexing as he pumped his cum into the

catch of the condom, leaning over me on his hands.

My lungs slowly started regulating, head clearing as I melted into the mattress. I smiled deliriously when I felt Theo's thighs trembling wildly against the back of mine, and we both groaned as he slowly pulled out.

"Jesus." He sounded as breathless as I was.

I heard the snap of the condom as he carefully pulled it off and tied it in a knot, and then he was gently rolling me onto my back. I blinked up at him from under heavy eyelids.

"Are you okay?" His brow was creased with concern, dark eyes roaming over my face before dipping to my throat.

I smiled up at him languidly, still feeling lightheaded and spaced out. "I'm perfect."

"Do you need some water?"

I shook my head, feeling only a slight twinge in my throat. "No, just stay here."

Theo collapsed onto the bed beside me with a grunt and immediately pulled me into his arms. I curled up on his chest, my cheek sticking to his damp chest hair, and listened to the thunder of his heart slowly decrease.

My body relaxed against his, leg sliding over his calf to hook around his knee. I let out a slow exhale, eyes sliding shut.

"Sure you're okay, dimples?" he murmured, fingers slipping into my hair.

I nodded and slid my hand over his sternum, then higher to fiddle absently with the bar in his nipple. Long minutes later I kissed his chest and rolled onto my back, stretching out, my body pleasantly aching in the best way.

"That was perfect," I mumbled, and heard Theo huff in amusement.

He rolled his head on the pillow to look at me. "Have you done that a lot?"

I chuckled, looking back at him with a smirk. "What, sex?"

He smiled and shifted onto his side, a big hand palming my cheek. "No. Breath play."

My cheeks heated. "Uh, no. Never. I just—Sorry if it was weird—"

"It wasn't weird." Theo was gazing at me with earnest eyes. "It's just… not something to be taken lightly. With people you don't fully trust."

I shrugged a shoulder, trying to ignore the faint hint of unease in my gut as I gazed back at him and said, "I trust you."

Theo stared at me in silence for a moment longer, before bridging the gap between us to kiss me. “Good. You can.”

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

"I told Inaya I was sick to get out of work," I mumbled as we lay on the bed, the sweat on our bodies drying in the sunlight streaming through the slats of the blind.

Theo huffed a little laugh, fingers playing idly in my hair as I rested my cheek on his hairy chest. "Bet that's the worst thing you've ever done."

"What?" I sat up, glaring down at him. "I'm not—I've done bad things before!"

"Oh yeah?" He smirked at me. "Like what?"

"I—" I cast about frantically for something. *Anything.* "I stole make-up once when I was a teenager," I finally blurted. "Because my mum wouldn't buy it for me."

Theo nodded solemnly, tucking my hair behind my ear. "I promise not to turn you in."

"Ugh, shut up." I smacked his chest lightly before flopping down beside him, burying my cheek in the pillow. "I've done plenty of bad stuff."

Except I definitely hadn't. Shit, I was still feeling guilty for skiving off work for an afternoon, for god's sake.

Theo turned onto his side to face me and raised his pierced brow. "I thought you were a good boy."

Despite how sated my body was, arousal bloomed sweetly in the pit of my stomach. My voice was croaky when I said, "I am. When I need to be."

He shifted his head closer on the pillow to nuzzle my cheek before kissing me. "I know you are, sweetheart," he murmured.

I pursed my lips, fingers playing absently with his chest hair. "Want to stay for a while? I can make us dinner later."

His mouth quirked into a tiny rueful smile. “I wish I could, but I actually have a meeting.” Sitting up, he glanced down at his watch and huffed. “In twenty minutes.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face, then reached back to find the hair tie dangling from what remained of his bun. I’d pulled most of his hair free from it already. As his dark hair fell around his shoulders in messy waves, my eyes drifted down his spine to a mark on his lower back.

It looked like a birthmark, maybe. About the size of a large thumbprint, and a deep brownish-red colour. Tucking one arm under my head, I reached out with the other and lightly traced my fingertips over it. He didn’t react at all, like he couldn’t even feel me touching it.

Sitting up, I shoved back my hair and let out a contented sigh as I stretched. Theo glanced back, a tiny smirk playing on his lips as he leaned over and kissed me once.

“Hope I made your infraction worth it,” he murmured.

“Good enough,” I teased, giving him one more kiss before sliding off the bed and reaching for my robe. “Do you want some water before you go?”

“Yeah, please. Thanks, sweetheart.”

My belly warmed with pleasure as I left the bedroom, stopping in the bathroom on the way to the living room so I could start running a bath. Might as well make the most of my impromptu afternoon off.

After pouring in some bubble bath, I went into the kitchen and grabbed a glass, filling it with water and taking several deep gulps before topping it up again.

I turned around when I heard the tap of Theo’s shoes on the floor, smiling as he walked into the living room fully dressed once again, fiddling with his cuff. He looked so immaculate and put together, his hair back up in its bun, his suit somehow unwrinkled despite the crumpled heap he’d left it in on my bedroom floor. Part of me almost couldn’t believe that I’d just had his cock inside me and his hand around my throat.

Theo took the glass I held out and drained it in several deep gulps before setting it on the counter. Stepping closer, he smoothed his palm over my hip through the silky robe and leaned down to kiss me. I laughed against his mouth and wiped away the water droplets clinging to his beard around his lips.

“Want to come to mine this weekend?” he asked when we broke the kiss, fingers slipping down to the top of my ass. “I’ll cook for you.”

I grinned up at him, affection tightening my chest when he raised his other hand to cup my face and rub his thumb over the dimple in my cheek. “That sounds nice.”

He nodded and stepped back, glancing at his watch. “Any food you don’t like?”

“No, I’ll eat anything.” I paused and wrinkled my nose. “Except *mykyrokka.* It’s a Finnish dish my mum always used to make, and I hate it. It’s blood dumpling soup.”

Theo’s mouth twitched. “No blood dumplings, got it. I’ll take them off the menu.”

“Thanks.” I grinned and stretched up for one last kiss. “See you tomorrow?”

He nodded. “I’ll meet you before work for coffee.”

I followed him into the hallway and waved at him from behind the door when he left, not wanting any neighbours to catch me in my robe. Although, Theo and I *had* just fucked with my curtains open and the slats of my blind lifted, so anyone could have peered in and seen us.

Heading into the bathroom, I turned off the taps and shed my robe. I put on some lofi hip hop and set my phone down on the edge of the sink. My asshole twinged when I stepped into the tub and lowered myself into the hot water, making me sigh through my smile as I settled back.

My neck was only the tiniest bit sore, and I couldn’t feel any bruises forming there from the press of Theo’s fingers. He’d been gentle with me in that regard, even as his cock had pounded me into the mattress. I shivered with pleasure at the memory and sank deeper into the hot water, submerging myself up to my chin.

Beneath the water, I trailed my fingertips lightly over the bitemark on my hip. That *would* bruise, and so would the one on my inner thigh.

Smiling, my eyes slid shut and I sighed, relaxing back in the bath. The downtempo music lulled me into a light doze, my body pleasantly tired.

A strand of hair tickled my cheek, so I lifted a hand out of the water to push it back, leaving a stripe of wetness on my face. It happened again, making me frown in irritation with my eyes still closed, but before I could reach up, a waft of hot air blew over my face, the scent of burning wood filling my nose.

It had felt like a breath.

My eyes snapped open, heart giving a mighty thump in my chest. The bathroom was empty. I panted lightly as I looked around, but there was nothing there. The door was still closed. The only sound other than music was the gentle *plink* of water droplets dripping from the tap by my feet.

It was just… a breeze, I thought to myself forcefully, except there was no window in here.

Struggling upright, I took a deep breath and reached for my shampoo. I'd just imagined it. I'd been falling asleep. Lathering up my hair, I focused on the music playing from my phone.

Thump.

I froze, fingers buried in my hair as my gaze shot to the door. When another low *thud* came from beyond it, my body jerked back fruitlessly, water splashing up the sides of the tub.

Licking my lips, I shakily called, "Edel?"

They shouldn't have been home from work yet, but maybe they'd taken a half day or something. A third thump had my knees drawing up protectively, my vision going spotty as I imagined someone breaking into the flat.

My eyes darted to my phone, resting on the edge of the sink at the other end of the bathroom. Moving as quietly as possible, I stood up in the bath and stepped shakily onto the mat. I took a step forward, the tiles slippery under my wet feet, and reached out for my phone, turning off the music.

Nothing but silence greeted me.

I stood frozen for long seconds, ears straining as shampoo dripped down my forehead and stung my eyes. I started shivering as the air cooled my wet skin, but I crept closer to the door and brought my ear to it, listening intently for any sounds in the flat.

Nothing.

It must have been the upstairs neighbour, I thought as I let out a shaky breath, backing away from the door and putting my phone down on the edge of the sink. My skin prickled as I climbed unsteadily back into the bath, scrubbing the shampoo out of my eyes.

Unease was still cramping my gut as I took a deep breath and dunked my head under the water to rinse the shampoo from my hair. Something compelled me to open my eyes—maybe fear, maybe the sense of being watched—and my mouth opened in terror when I saw the black shape

looming above me through the murky water, letting out all the air out of my lungs in a rush.

Huge, shadowy, tiny white pupils consuming me, horns jutting into the air.

I burst out of the water in panic, coughing and spluttering before I was able to suck in a trembling breath. There was nothing there, no black shape, but my hands were shaking as I hastily finished washing and climbed out. I nearly slipped on the wet patches my feet had previously left as I shoved on my robe and twisted my hair into a towel.

I remembered Theo's words as I snatched up my phone and fled the bathroom. *Ignore it. Don't react to it. Don't acknowledge it.*

Did he have experience with this? Had he been… haunted? Part of me wanted to laugh hysterically at myself for even thinking the word. I'd never really believed in ghosts or the paranormal. I'd never seen or felt or experienced anything weird like that before.

But what was the alternative? That I was losing my mind?

Maybe I was just tired. Or… I don't know. Not getting enough vitamins. As I went into my bedroom and started drying off, I decided to follow Theo's advice and ignore anything odd I saw. I would simply refuse to acknowledge it.

After getting dressed in comfy sweats and a loose t shirt, I stripped off the duvet cover from my bed, seeing as I'd come all over it. Bundling it and the rest of my laundry in my arms, I went into the kitchen and shoved it all in the washing machine. The floral scent of the fabric softener relaxed me as I poured it into the machine, and the low hum and whirr once I'd started the cycle made my shoulders finally unclench.

Everything was normal. It was. The sun was shining brightly through the windows, and I curled my toes against the floor as I stood in a warm patch by the sink and poured myself a glass of water from the tap.

When my skin prickled and I thought I saw something big and dark blocking out the light in the doorway to the hall, I ignored it, biting down hard on my inner cheek. Turning my back, I pulled open the fridge and grabbed a yoghurt.

I didn't let myself think too hard about the fact that I chose to sit down on the sofa butted up against the wall so I could see the rest of the room. After switching on the TV and settling on a rerun of a crime drama show, I tucked my legs under me and ate my yoghurt. Leaning forward to set the

spoon and empty container on the coffee table, I lay down on the sofa and dragged down the blanket draped over the back to cover me.

My eyes grew heavy as I watched the TV with disinterest. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, warming the thick blanket I was nestled under. I could feel Theo's bitemark throbbing lightly on my inner thigh as I dozed off.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

When I jerked awake, I could tell it was late afternoon, the sky darkening through the windows. Sitting up with a yawn, I turned off the TV and rubbed my face. I realised the buzzer had woken me up when it rang again, echoing down the hallway.

I tried to pat down my sleep-mussed hair, still slightly damp, as I padded down the hallway to the front door. Pressing the intercom button, I said, "Hello?" through another yawn.

"Delivery for Ari Sheppard," a familiar voice said cheerfully.

"Um, okay. Come in." I buzzed him in, then picked up my bag and carried it into my bedroom while I waited for him to reach the flat door.

Opening it after I heard his quick knock, I blinked when I realised it was Tom, our regular delivery guy at the florist shop.

"I don't know if I should be offended that you didn't recognise my voice straight away." He chuckled, holding out the enormous bouquet of pastel flowers, wrapped in our signature brown parcel paper with Inaya's logo on the little card tucked within.

"Oh, wow." I took the bouquet, smiling when the sweet scent washed over me. "What—"

"From your Bluebeard. Inaya told me to tell you that." Tom grinned at me, then nodded at the flowers. "He must be smitten with you, eh?"

My cheeks heated, and I cleared my throat. "I—Yeah, I guess," I chuckled.

"Inaya said you weren't feeling well, so hopefully these will cheer you up." Tom gave me a little wave before turning to walk down the hall. "See

you at work."

"Bye," I said distractedly, grinning down at the flowers as I shut the front door.

I could tell that Inaya had made this, the flowers arranged in her signature style. Stock in varying shades of royal purple, lavender and lilac, apricot lisianthus, peach roses and white delphinium. It was gorgeous, the fresh scent making my eyes briefly shut as I breathed it in.

Cradling the bouquet in one arm as I made my way back to the living room, I plucked the little brown envelope free and eagerly opened it. It simply said, *From Theo*, but it was enough to make me smile.

Setting the bouquet by the sink, I stretched up on my tiptoes to grab a vase from the top of a cabinet. Then I retrieved some scissors, carefully unwrapped the brown paper from around the bouquet, and began the monotonous yet soothing task of trimming the stems at an angle so they were the right length. The flat was quiet as I worked, cars occasionally driving past outside.

Once I was done and the bouquet was displayed proudly on our tiny dining table by the window, I padded over to the sofa and sat down to grab my phone and text Theo, thanking him. Noticing the time, I shot off another text to Edel letting them know that I'd start making dinner for us both before dropping my phone on the sofa and standing up.

After transferring my laundry from the washing machine to the dryer, I started pulling ingredients out of the fridge for Thai green curry. Heaving the rice cooker out of the cupboard, I plugged it in and measured out just the right quantity of rice, rinsing it before dumping it in with the precise amount of water.

Despite my nap, my body was tired and a little sluggish as I moved around the kitchen, chopping onion and green peppers. I tensed for only a second when I heard the front door being unlocked, but Edel's cheerful, "*Hallo!*" relaxed my muscles again.

"Hi!" I called back, stirring the chicken sizzling in the pan before opening a cupboard to get a tin of coconut milk. "Thai green curry okay?"

"Sounds perfect, thanks." Edel appeared in the doorway, a little out of breath with their brown skin lightly flushed. They looked around the living room expectantly before their expression sank. "*Ach,* I just missed him, then."

I glanced over with a tiny frown as I opened the fridge and got the jar of Thai green curry paste. “Who?”

“Your Bluebeard!” Edel shrugged out of their coat. “I want to meet him. I practically ran home so I could.”

“Theo’s not here.” I pursed my lips to try and suppress my smile as I peeled open the lid of the coconut milk tin. “But um, he *was* here earlier. I kind of pretended to be sick so I could come home and have sex.”

“Ari.” Edel shot me a surprised, impressed look. “That’s so unlike you.”

I rolled my eyes and let out a little grunt. Why was everyone acting like I was some perfect angel? I could be a rebel if I wanted to. I just… didn’t really want to. Most of the time.

“Was it good?” Edel called from the hallway as they hung their coat up. “The sex?”

I chuckled, adding the curry paste and coconut milk to the pan with the rest of the ingredients. “Yeah, it was good.”

Better than good. Perfect. Magnificent. God, I wanted to *worship* his body.

“Are those from him?” Edel asked, padding back into the room in their socks and nodding at the big bunch of flowers on the dining table.

I grinned, leaning my hips against the counter as I stirred the curry. “Yeah, they’re from him.”

“Wow. Another point to Bluebeard then.”

I glanced over at them as I wiped my hands on the tea towel. “How did you know he was here?”

“I think you accidentally called me. You left me a long voicemail and I could hear him talking.”

I went red, imagining what they might have overheard. “Shit. Sorry if you heard us, uh…”

“No, not that.” Edel laughed as they got the juice from the fridge and poured a glass. “It was just him talking really quietly. It sounded like you were moving around doing something.”

Leaning their hip on the counter as they took a sip, they flashed me a teasing grin over the rim of the glass. “He must’ve slunk out just before I got home. After I powerwalked back and everything to try and catch him.”

I chuckled. “Theo left hours ago. He had a meeting.”

Edel paused, their dark brows twitching into a frown. “But you only called me about ten minutes ago.”

“Huh?”

They nodded emphatically, putting down their glass to retrieve their phone from where they’d left it on the back of the sofa. “My phone was in my bag when I was walking home so I missed the call, but I felt it vibrate when I got the voicemail.”

Wandering back over as they thumbed through their phone, they turned it so I could see the screen. “See?”

At the top of their recent calls list I could see my name in red, with *17:47* written clearly as the time the call had been placed. Just over ten minutes ago, as Edel had said. Turning the phone back a little so they could see the screen, Edel tapped over to voicemail. My name appeared again at the top, saying I’d left a three-minute voicemail.

I gripped the edge of the counter tight, trying not to get too freaked out.

“You said you heard a voice? There was—there was no one else here ten minutes ago.” I licked my lips, then sucked in a hopeful breath. “Actually, Tom stopped by to deliver my flowers. But that was—I thought that was longer ago than that.”

“Did he stay for long?”

“I—” My eyes darted back to the phone screen just before it locked itself and went black. “No, only for a minute. He didn’t come in or anything.”

“Well, there’s someone talking for the whole time in this.” Edel unlocked their phone again and gave me a hesitant look. “Do you want to hear it?”

I didn’t. Something was telling me I didn’t. I pushed aside the ridiculous thought and nodded, swallowing hard.

There was nothing for a few seconds after Edel hit play and turned it on speakerphone. They held the phone up between us and we both fell silent, listening intently.

I heard a rustle, then the faint slap of my bare feet on the floor, getting fainter. A creak, then a rapid clicking, which I quickly realised was me turning on the dryer when the rumbling hum of it sounded a second later.

“Listen,” Edel whispered, holding the phone up higher. “You can hear it now.”

I leaned in closer, feeling mildly sick. It took a while for my ears to pick it out, but when they did, I went hot all over.

There was a voice. A low, impossibly deep voice, mumbling incomprehensible words in a constant flow. I knew instantly that it wasn't Theo's voice, and it couldn't have been anyway. He'd been gone for hours. And it wasn't Tom's voice either.

This voice sounded… wrong.

Sweat bloomed under my arms as my knuckles bleached, gripping the edge of the counter hard. Over the voice, I could hear myself opening the fridge. I could hear the dry flurry of rice being poured into the rice cooker. The tap turning on then off.

All normal sounds that had happened just minutes ago, when the flat had been otherwise quiet.

I was breathing hard through my nose, and I could feel Edel watching me anxiously, but I couldn't bring myself to look at them. The voice didn't stop, the sound of it making my blood run cold, but I could hear other sounds that hadn't been there before. Something heavy, sounding almost like hooves, clopping on the hard floor. A loud, beastly snort that made us both jump.

The voicemail cut off abruptly, and Edel stared at me with fearful eyes as they lowered the phone. "Was… was the TV on?"

I licked my dry lips. "No. It was on earlier, but…"

Giving their shoulders a little shake, they set down the phone and picked up their juice. "It must have been the neighbour's TV or something. Or people outside."

I could hear the uneasy edge in their voice, could sense that they were trying to convince themself as much as they were trying to convince me. I tensed when they squeezed my shoulder gently.

"Don't let yourself freak out about it, Ari. Hell, it's probably something totally normal that just *sounds* like a voice. Like… the fridge. Or the dryer."

I cleared my throat, blinking rapidly and turning in a daze to the stove. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure it was."

I stirred the curry, not letting myself acknowledge the fact that I *recognised* that voice. Not letting the overwhelming terror of that night, when I thought I'd seen and heard something here, wash over me.

We both jumped when the rice cooker clicked off loudly. Edel launched into action, chattering away in an overly cheerful tone as they collected bowls and cutlery and helped me dish up. I carefully moved the vase of flowers out of the way when we sat down to eat at the table. For a split

second, I had a juvenile longing for Theo to be here. I knew I'd feel safer if he was here. He was so big and solid and calm.

We didn't talk much as we ate. I'd lost my appetite a little, but dutifully spooned curry and rice into my mouth.

When I paused and reached for my glass of water, I heard myself saying, "It was probably from earlier. When he was still here. Maybe the voicemail just got delayed coming through or something."

Except I knew all of that wasn't true. I knew it couldn't be true.

Edel nodded and spoke around their mouthful. "Yes, probably."

I gulped some water and set the glass down, but my fingers wouldn't let go, clutching it tightly. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

When I glanced up, Edel's face had softened into a sympathetic expression. Reaching across the table, they clasped my arm gently. "No. I don't. These things can *always* be explained, Ari. Please don't let yourself get scared."

I blushed and nodded quickly, feeling foolish. Tugging my arm back, I gave Edel a wobbly smile and started eating again, the food sitting uncomfortably in my stomach.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Edel insisted on clearing up after dinner, so I flopped down on the sofa and picked up my phone. I didn't look at my recent calls, not wanting to see the evidence of that unsettling voicemail. Instead, I tapped open my messages.

Edel had texted me back, *Omw, don't let him leave I want to meet him!!*

I quickly clicked off and went to my other waiting message, which was from Theo.

Glad you like them. Felt a little weird ordering you flowers from where you work, but so did the thought of ordering them from one of your competitors.

I smiled down at my phone, bringing my legs up to tuck them underneath me.

We appreciate your business, I texted back teasingly. *What are you up to?*

Talking to him was chasing away the uneasiness in my gut. I relaxed back into the sofa, tugging the blanket over my lap to get cosy. The sound of Edel clattering around in the kitchen was soothing.

Just finished walking Athena, about to make dinner. What about you?

Just had dinner as well. I made Thai green curry. Smiling, I added, *I just used curry paste from a jar. Bet you hate that.*

Theo's reply came through quickly. *From a JAR? That's blasphemy. I'll make you real Thai green curry one day.*

Saturday? I typed back.

No, Saturday is blood pudding, remember?

I bit my lip around my smile, feeling like a besotted teenager. *It's blood DUMPLINGS, not pudding. And if you serve me that I'll never trust your cooking again.*

Sorry, my mistake, he texted back. *I promise to never cook you anything consisting mainly of blood.*

A second later, he texted again. *Does steak count?*

No, steak is fine, I replied. *I like steak.*

When Theo's reply came through, my eyes flared as I stared at the screen. My cock twitched in my sweats, so I tugged the blanket higher as I glanced furtively at Edel loading the dishwasher.

Steak I can do. You know, my back is still twinging from how hard I fucked you earlier. You might be too energetic for me, dimples.

My thumbs flew over my phone screen. *You seemed to keep up pretty well. But I can tone it down for you if you want.*

His reply came through almost instantly. *Don't you fucking dare.*

My cock twitched again, starting to fill. My pulse sped up, and I could feel the throb of it in my throat as I typed back, *I can still feel your bitemark on my thigh.*

I jumped when Edel flopped down heavily on the other sofa with a deep sigh, pulling their socked feet up and crossing their ankles on the armrest.

"What's got you smiling?" They grunted as they leaned over to grab the TV remote from the coffee table, almost toppling off the couch. "Texting your Bluebeard?"

"Mhmm," I said distractedly as another text from him came through.

Good. When it fades, I'll give you another. And maybe one on that perfect ass.

My fingers gripped my phone tight as I stared down at the message. I was absolutely going to hold him to that.

We texted on and off throughout the evening as Edel and I watched a film. When it ended, they sat up with a yawn and said they were going to take a shower and go to bed. I said goodnight and stayed on the sofa,

flipping my phone idly in my hands as I stared blankly at the ads playing on the TV screen.

It was only once I heard them finish up in the bathroom and close their bedroom door for the night that I started to feel uneasy. The lamps were on in the living area, but the kitchen was dark and shadowy at the other side of the room.

Shoving the blanket aside, I got up and turned off the lamps before hurriedly walking out of the room. After brushing my teeth, I checked the front door was locked before going into my room, softly closing the door behind me.

It was dark in here, and my heart spasmed as I fumbled for the light switch. Wincing in the bright overhead light, I walked round the bed to flick on my bedside lamp before returning to the door to turn off the main light, feeling childish. I wasn't scared of the dark. I'd never been scared of the dark, but…

Giving my head a little shake to rid myself of the thoughts before they could start creeping back in, I swapped my clothes for my pyjamas and sat down at my dressing table. Carrying out my nightly ritual made some of the tension bleed away, and I stared at my reflection as I patted in my toner, serum and moisturiser.

Only when I stood up and tucked my chair neatly back under the dressing table did I realise I hadn't put my duvet cover back on after washing it. I chewed on my lip as my gaze darted from the bed to the door.

I didn't want to go back out there.

A fierce wave of defiance rose in me. No. I wasn't going to let myself get scared of my own fucking flat. God knew we paid enough to rent it. If there *was* a ghost here, they were living here free of charge, so they could just go fuck themselves.

Tugging open my door, I crept down the hall so I didn't disturb Edel. I could see a thin strip of light illuminating the crack at the bottom of their door, and knowing they were still awake calmed me enough to step into the living room and flick on the light, even though I half expected to see… something standing in there.

Kneeling down in front of the dryer, I yanked my laundry out and stood with the bundle in my arms. I didn't stop even when a sock slid from the top of the pile and fell to the floor, using my elbow to turn off the light and padding quickly back to my room.

After dumping the pile on my bed, I booted up my laptop and set it on the nightstand so I could watch something while I sorted my clothes. The repetitiveness of folding shirts and trousers and pairing up socks was soothing as I sat cross legged on my bed, only half paying attention to the random romcom playing on my laptop.

My phone lit up with a new text from Theo just as I was putting the last neat stack of clothing in my drawers. Knowing I'd get distracted instantly once I opened it, I set my phone on the bedside table and quickly put the cover back on my duvet. After settling into bed with a sigh, I grabbed my phone and unlocked it with a smile.

What are you up to, dimples?

I texted back, *Just finished making my bed, seeing as you made me come all over it earlier.*

There was a faint thud directly overhead from the upstairs flat. I frowned up at the ceiling, but my attention was pulled quickly back to my phone when I saw the three dots appear as Theo started typing back.

Fuck yes I did.

You definitely made lying to my boss to get out of work worth it, I typed back teasingly.

Well that's good, seeing as I really fucking enjoyed myself, Theo replied. *I came so hard I thought I was going to pop a blood vessel.*

Biting my lip, ignoring another irritating thud from the neighbour upstairs, I typed back, *So what else do you wanna do to me other than bite me again?*

A third thud from above. What were they doing up there, moving furniture? I rolled onto my side and pressed my cheek to the pillow, staring intently at my phone screen as I waited for Theo to reply.

When he did, my legs shifted restlessly under the covers, cock perking up for what felt like the millionth time tonight.

Tie you up. See how long I can make you wait before I let you come.

Fuck. I gnawed on my lower lip, typing back quickly. *Can we do that Saturday?*

I could picture Theo reading the text and chuckling, flashing that tiny gap between his front teeth in the depths of his indigo beard.

His reply came through a second later. *Maybe. If you're a good boy.*

My cock lurched in my silky pyjama bottoms, brushing against the cool, smooth fabric and making me shiver.

You know I am, I said.
It took a few minutes for him to reply this time.
Yeah, he said back. *I know you are, sweetheart.*

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Theo's home was just as beautiful as I remembered it when I went there for dinner on Saturday.

He picked me up after I got home from work, showered and changed, resting his big hand on my thigh the entire way between gear changes. It was already dark when we reached his place, and the front of the house was illuminated softly by warm spotlights, making it look even bigger and more imposing.

I hadn't been around wealth much in my life. Theo didn't flaunt it, but he was clearly wealthy. The thought made me more uncomfortable than anything else—made me wonder what I could bring to this blossoming relationship. I was saddled with student debt, paying extortionate rent prices like everyone else, and my financial situation was unlikely to change drastically. I didn't think floristry ever paid all that well, unless I became some world-renowned wedding florist to the stars.

Athena greeted us at the door, excited to see us both. I crouched down and gave her a big fuss before straightening to set down my bag. Theo helped me take off my jacket, hanging it on the coat hooks before grabbing my hand and leading me down the hallway to the kitchen.

As we passed the stairs, my eyes flitted over that weird old door again, the one to the wine cellar.

I laughed lightly. "Okay, you've got to tell me why you keep it padlocked. Are you *really* that precious about your wine?"

He stopped, shooting me a wry smile.

"The door's old and doesn't shut on its own anymore." Shrugging lightly, he added, "Got to keep it temperature-controlled down there. Plus,

the cellar's pretty big, with parts I haven't looked after. Don't want Athena getting down there."

"I bet she'd get into all sorts of trouble, huh?" I looked down at the dog panting beside us, reaching down to scratch behind her ears.

"Oh yeah. I've lost count of the number of times I've found dead rabbits and pheasants on the patio." He grimaced as we kept walking to the kitchen. "Or in the house, when I've left the door open."

I laughed. "She's just helping her master. Bringing him fresh game to cook."

"Her master is happy buying his fresh game from the butcher like everyone else." He dropped my hand and rounded the island, heading for the huge stainless-steel fridge freezer. "What would you like to drink? Wine?"

I winced as I slid into one of the seats. "Um, I'm not actually much of a wine drinker. I think it tastes like somebody's already drunk it."

Theo turned with a chuckle, his beard glowing cobalt in the light from the fridge. "Then you've never had good wine."

I grinned. "Probably not. Poor student, poor florist."

"Okay, no wine. I have spirits. Or IPA."

"A gin and tonic would be great. Or vodka tonic."

"No problem. What do they drink in Finland?" Theo asked as he made his way over to the drinks' cabinet behind me.

"Vodka mainly, I think. Oh, and this spiced drink called *Glogg* in the winter. My grandma let me try some one Christmas when I was younger."

He nodded, pulling an expensive looking bottle of gin off the shelf. "Is your dad Finnish too?"

"Nope, British." I traced a finger over the island counter and shrugged. "But he took off when I was little, so..."

Theo's warm hand slid over my back as he passed me, dropping a kiss in my hair. "Sorry, dimples."

"It's okay." I gave him a brittle smile as he placed the bottle on the other side of the island. "How about you? Do your parents live round here?"

Theo turned to grab two glasses from a cabinet. "No. Both my parents are gone."

"I'm sorry," I murmured, watching as he went back to the fridge to fill the glasses with ice.

He shrugged, eyes fixed on the ice dispenser. "It was a long time ago."

Returning to the island with the glasses and two small cans of tonic, he smiled at me. “Hungry?”

He obviously wanted to move on from the topic, so I grinned at him and rested my elbows on the island, leaning forward. “Yes.”

“You said you like steak, so I went with steak,” he said as he made our drinks. “I did look up that Finnish blood dumpling recipe though.” He gave me a tiny shrug and a smile as he slid my drink across the island. “It actually sounds nice.”

I laughed, picking up my drink. “Well, you can make it for yourself and tell me what you think. I’m sure my mum will try and serve it to me next time I visit.”

“How often do you visit her?”

I took a sip, savouring the sharp cool taste, and shrugged. “Just a couple of times a year. We’re not overly close. She’s kind of self-centred, actually.” Giving a self-conscious little laugh, I quickly added, “Do you need any help with making dinner?”

“No, you just sit there and keep me company.” He returned to the fridge to start pulling out ingredients. “Or you can go and play with Athena if you want.”

“I still haven’t gotten that tour I was promised,” I said coyly, grinning at him when he glanced over, dark eyes flashing.

“You know we’ll never eat if I take you upstairs.” The stern edge to his voice made my stomach clench.

“Maybe after dinner, then?” I asked innocently, trailing my fingertips through the condensation on the side of my glass.

“Oh yeah, dimples,” he said, long fingers deftly unwrapping a package of brown paper, revealing two bloody steaks within. “I am *absolutely* taking you upstairs after dinner.”

WE TALKED EASILY while Theo cooked, the mouth-watering scents of sizzling butter, garlic and rosemary filling the kitchen. He sat down beside me at the island to eat, placing a plate in front of me with perfectly

seasoned steak, tenderstem broccoli and roasted baby potatoes, their skins burnished gold.

I switched to water after my second gin and tonic, wanting to remain clearheaded for whatever might happen after dinner. Athena sat at Theo's feet while we ate, leaning her big body against the side of the island and watching our every move with laser focus, hoping one of us dropped something on the floor.

I smiled affectionately when Theo sternly told her she couldn't have any because of the garlic, saying he'd feed her once we were done. I insisted on clearing the plates while he poured kibble into her bowl, which she attacked ferociously, wolfing it down.

Despite being pleasantly full, my insides twisted with anticipation when I approached Theo, leaning up to kiss him as I slipped my fingers under the hem of his shirt and trailed them through the coarse hair on his soft belly.

"Thank you for dinner," I murmured, smiling as I nuzzled his beard. "*Now* can I have that tour?"

Theo smirked. "The whole house? Or just my bedroom?"

I chuckled, trailing my fingers out from under his shirt to brush briefly over the front of his jeans, just to see his eyes spark with arousal. "I *do* actually want to see your house. You can save your bedroom for the last stop on the tour."

Giving me one last kiss on the cheek, Theo tangled our fingers together and led me to the double doors at the other end of the kitchen. Opening them, he flicked on the light to reveal a formal dining room. The air smelled a little musty, like it wasn't used often.

We went through a side door to the big sitting room, and I could see more spotlights illuminating the edge of the patio outside, the garden and a shadowy black mass beyond. Going into the front hall, he took me through the big double doors I'd noticed the last time I was here.

It was a huge library that stretched across the entire length of the house from front to back, big windows at either end. Dark wooden bookcases lined the walls, and there was even one of those ladders you could slide along on rails to reach the top shelves.

"Oh my god, I've always wanted to use one of those," I told Theo excitedly.

He chuckled, tugging on my hand to lead me over. I climbed on, my gaze flitting briefly over books that looked old, with thick embossed leather

covers, before Theo was giving me a gentle push.

I squawked when the ladder slid smoothly along. “Shit, this moves faster than I thought it would.”

Theo laughed and walked over to meet me, big hands sliding round my waist to steady me as I climbed off.

“You like reading then?” I asked as he took my hand and led me to another door.

He shrugged, opening it. “Passes the time.”

I poked my head into what I quickly realised was his office, a big solid-wood desk dominating the centre of the space. After flicking the light back off, he took me to the other set of doors in there. A waft of warm, steamy air greeted us, smelling like earth and vegetation. When he turned on the light, I realised why.

“A winter garden,” he said, and I could hear the wry smile in his voice, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the sea of green in front of us.

An old-fashioned glass and metal roof loomed above us, stretching back. Plants covered the space, an enormous monstera dominating one corner in a huge stone pot, greenery dripping from above in hanging planters. Rattan seats with plump cream cushions were arranged in the centre of the room alongside tall, slender bird of paradise plants, their spiky orange and cobalt blooms bobbing gently in the rising warm air.

“Not exactly flowers.” Theo chuckled. “But I thought you’d like this.”

“It’s amazing.” I leaned into him, and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “I hope you pay your gardener enough. She has a lot to look after.”

Theo huffed in amusement, gently guiding me back out of the room. “We can eat breakfast in here, if you want.” He glanced down at me, pierced brow quirking as we walked back through the library. “If you want to stay over, that is.”

I grinned up at him. “Depends how nice your bedroom is.”

He collected my bag by the front door when we emerged into the hall, hooking it over his shoulder before sliding his hands round my waist and down to the top of my ass.

“Did you pack your pyjamas?” he asked with a tiny teasing smile, flashing me the gap between his front teeth.

“No.” I smirked up at him, sliding my hands up his chest. “Didn’t think I’d need them. I did bring a change of clothes though, just in case. I’m

optimistic."

Theo grunted, hefting me into his arms and carrying me to the staircase. My legs clung to his waist, and I wrapped my arms loosely around his neck, playing with his bun.

"Are you wearing panties again, dimples?" he rasped, big hands cupping my backside and holding me tight to his front.

"Of course," I said innocently, giving him a coy smile.

He grinned back at me, carrying me and my bag up the stairs.

"Good boy."

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

We didn't bother with a tour of the upstairs.

It wasn't long before I found myself naked and straddling Theo's lap, riding his cock frantically as he leaned back against the headboard in the middle of his huge four poster bed.

His long fingers gripped my ass hard, and I whined when he grazed a nipple with his teeth, my head tipping back, hair tickling my shoulder blades.

Jarring bliss pounded through me with every feverish smack of my ass down onto his lap, the erotic sound filling the big room. I shuddered, gripping his hair too tight and pulling, but he didn't seem to mind as he groaned and sank his teeth into my shoulder.

I started rocking my hips back and forth instead so I could move faster and faster. His cock relentlessly teased my prostate, and I knew that the slide of my straining dick against his stomach was going to be enough to make me come, my pre-cum matting the dark hair there.

Theo groaned, a low, rabid sound that pulsed through me. "You like riding my cock, sweetheart?" he rasped, his fingers drifting inward to feel himself sliding in and out of me.

"Yes," I whimpered, my lips parting with a gasp when my impending orgasm tightened all my muscles. "Yes. Yes, yes, yes—"

I cried out when it hit me, hips spasming as my cock painted long lines of cum over Theo's chest and stomach, stark white against his tanned skin and dark hair. He grunted, hips flexing up hard and toppling me forward as

he started to come. I panted against his cheek, trailing my slack lips over the bristles of his beard until I reached his mouth.

He groaned, tongue thrusting as his cock bucked one last time inside me before his body sagged. We kissed languidly between our shared hectic breaths, thundering hearts gradually starting to slow.

Eventually I slid off his lap and collapsed beside him. God, he was like a drug. I felt loose and boneless as I stretched lazily in the centre of his big bed, sliding my foot up and down his hairy calf.

"Mmm." I let my arms flop over my head as my eyes slid shut. I didn't want to move, but I knew I had to go and clean up. My swollen hole clenched, slick with lube.

I heard Theo chuckle breathlessly beside me, and my mouth tipped up when he leaned down and kissed along my arm. "Want some water?"

"Yes please." I sighed and opened my eyes, struggling up and clawing back my messy hair. "Um, where's the bathroom?"

"I'll show you."

My legs were shaky as I slid off the bed and followed him out of the room. It felt a little weird to be walking around his house naked, but the bathroom was just across the hall, huge and gleaming white with an enormous tub against one wall and a sleek glass shower enclosure that looked big enough for at least two people.

After peeling off the condom and throwing it out, he left to get us some water. I listened to him unlock the back door and tell Athena to go out to pee before bed as I cleaned up, realising how far sounds echoed in this big house thanks to the wide corridors and tiled floors downstairs.

Once I was done, I turned off the light and padded back into the bedroom, the floorboards warm under my bare feet. The faint smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air in here, not enough to bother me, mainly because it was mostly drowned out by Theo's warm, woodsy scent. Clambering onto the huge bed, I slipped under the covers and briefly buried my face in his pillow. I breathed in the crisp scent of his beard oil mingling with the faint hints of shampoo and sleep-warmed skin.

I felt sleepy and wired at the same time. I could easily fuck again if Theo wanted to, but I didn't mention it as he padded back into the room with a glass of water. Smiling, I sat up to have a deep gulp once he handed it to me.

“Your bed’s comfortable,” I commented as he walked round to the other side and climbed in.

Setting the glass of water on the bedside table, I burrowed back under the covers and grinned at him as he lay down beside me with a relieved groan. After shuffling closer and dropping a kiss on his pierced nipple, I yawned and rolled onto my back.

Blinking in shock up at the straps and buckles stretching across the canopy of the bed, I asked, “What’s that?”

I could see chains wound up near the four corners. My stomach twisted with arousal and trepidation.

Theo rolled onto his side and slid warm fingers across my stomach beneath the covers. I tore my eyes away to glance at him, catching his smirk. “What do you think?”

My breath caught in my throat, and my eyes drifted shut as Theo started kissing along my shoulder and up my neck. I was already spreading my legs eagerly before he moved on top of me, the rasp of his beard tickling my skin.

THE ROOM WAS pitch black when I blinked my heavy eyes open, my cheek squashed against the pillow and the heat of Theo’s big body at my back.

His breaths were deep and even in sleep, tickling the back of my neck soothingly. I didn’t know what had woken me up until I shifted my leg and my full bladder protested. Groaning tiredly, I started to slide out from under Theo’s heavy arm slung over my waist, but then another sound drifted into my consciousness and made me freeze.

I could hear someone else breathing in the room.

It was quiet, faint under Theo’s steady breaths behind me. Low, chuffing snorts, like a wild animal on the brink of attack. My skin prickled, goosebumps breaking out all over despite the heat from our bodies trapped under the covers.

My arm was dangling off the side of the bed, I suddenly realised with a flash of terror. White spots danced in my vision as I pictured something grabbing me, pulling me onto the floor and dragging me under. I yanked my

arm back and stopped breathing entirely when a loud sound made my heart spasm, like a heavy hoof stamping angrily on the floor.

"Theo," I whispered shakily, clawing at his arm and shaking him awake. "Theo."

He sucked in a sharp breath as he jerked awake, groaning tiredly and rubbing his nose against the back of my neck. His voice was croaky with sleep when he asked, "What is it?"

"There's someone in here," I heard myself whisper.

Theo jerked up and leaned over me to turn on the bedside lamp. I blinked in the sudden glow, but couldn't bring myself to move, even when he laid a protective hand on my hip, his body tense as he looked around the room.

I felt him relax. "It's just Athena."

I blinked, letting him gently roll me onto my back before helping me sit up.

"See?" he said, giving me a sympathetic smile then nodding at the dog curled up beside the bed. She lifted her head to look at us, tail thumping sleepily on the floor.

Long fingers smoothed over my hair, pushing it back from my face. "She's meant to stay in her bed in the hallway, but she normally creeps in here in the middle of the night." He kissed my temple. "Sorry if she startled you."

God, I was so embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, rubbing my face. "I haven't—I haven't slept in a house with a dog for a long time."

"It's fine." His big hand rubbed my bare chest soothingly. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I gave him a wobbly smile. "I just—um, I need to pee."

As I slid out of bed, the childish part of me wanted to ask if he'd come with me so I didn't have to cross the dark hallway alone, but I was already embarrassed enough from waking him up, freaking out over his dog snoring, so I walked quickly to the bathroom and did my business.

He was lying down again when I got back into the bedroom, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Guilt made me bite my lip.

"Sorry," I said again, slipping back into bed. He immediately pulled me down into his arms.

“Don’t be silly.” He sounded half asleep already as he pressed a kiss to my hair. “Will you get the light?”

I stretched my arm back to turn off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Curling back into Theo’s big body, I rested my cheek on his chest, the hair tickling me, and flattened my palm over his sternum so I could feel the steady rise and fall of his even breaths.

He was asleep again within minutes, but I lay there awake for a long time, still feeling on edge even though I could hear Athena’s little snores from the floor.

When I thought I saw something move in the open doorway, blocking out the weak moonlight coming through the windows out there, I squeezed my eyes shut tight and pretended it didn’t exist.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Weeks passed in utter bliss.

I started spending almost every weekend at Theo's. At first it was just Saturday nights, then that turned into Friday and Saturday, until I was staying there all the way through 'til Monday and he began driving me to work every Tuesday morning. We couldn't get enough of each other.

He finally met Edel when we went to the bar I used to work at one evening for drinks with them and Amir. When Edel and I went to buy us all another round, they told me he seemed great and teasingly said they could see why I'd had such a crush on him before we'd ever even spoken.

He couldn't stay over at mine because of Athena, but he'd spent several evenings at the flat to have dinner with Edel and me after work. Late one night after he'd gone home, I put on some of my sexiest lingerie, then carefully arranged myself on the bed to take a photo. I sent it to Theo with a text saying, *Shall I bring this on Friday?*

Half an hour later, I'd gotten a reply telling me he was outside.

Tiptoeing into the hall, I'd buzzed him in, wincing at the loud noise and hoping it hadn't woken Edel and Amir. He strode in after I opened the door, eyes flashing in the lamplight spilling into the hallway from my bedroom as he took me in.

Trying to keep quiet, I dragged him into my room, where he proceeded to bend me over my dressing table chair and fuck me in front of the mirror, shoving my panties to one side. I'd barely been able to keep my eyes open

as he pounded his cock inside me, our gazes locked in the reflection and my fingers gripping the back of the chair painfully tight.

He'd had to cover my mouth with his palm to keep me quiet, and when his other hand dipped to lightly caress the wet head of my cock, I'd started shaking uncontrollably.

A split second before my eyes rolled back, I thought I'd seen something looming behind him, something big and dark with jutting horns and pinprick white pupils. Then I was coming hard all over the back of the chair, my whimpers muffled against Theo's hand as he let out a strained, quiet groan and tensed up, his cock flexing inside me.

The ghost was still around. I'd gotten better at ignoring it. Ignoring the faint triple knocks I sometimes heard, the scent of charred earth and steam I sometimes smelled, the low murmur of something that could have been a voice in the dead of night.

It followed me to Theo's every weekend, but I never mentioned it to him, not since that embarrassing incident where I mistook Athena for something else. I didn't want him to think I was weird or paranoid, even though he'd told me he believed me before. It was one thing to say you believed someone in theory. It was another when the person you were spending all your time with started babbling about voices and shadows and the unsettling sense of being watched in the dark.

When I heard or saw things at my place, the air always felt static with something that prickled like anger. Like the low, heavy thrum of an electrical current, pressing behind my eyes, making my head buzz.

When I was at Theo's, it was still terrifying, but calmer. An unnatural presence in the room, but with none of the hot fury. Almost like it was happy I was there. I didn't let myself read too much into it, worried that if I let myself go down that path I'd wind up convincing myself that a spirit was trying to control my life or guide my actions.

Aside from that, I was happy. *So* happy. Happier than I could remember being in a long time. I refused to let some freeloading ghost ruin that. I refused to let some unseen, inconsequential thing in the dark distract me from this blissful time with Theo. We were still desperate for each other, fucking constantly, holing ourselves up every weekend at his house to be alone. He cooked for me, bringing me breakfast in bed, or setting it out in the winter garden room so I could enjoy the morning sun streaming in through the glass and dappling over the leaves.

When it got warmer, we started eating outside on the patio, and he had the pool uncovered and cleaned so we could go swimming on days where it could *almost* be classed as hot. He brought me flowers, huge fat bouquets that were different every time, and told me I could pick whatever I wanted from the garden if I wanted to make my own arrangements for the house.

I hadn't thought men like him actually existed. He was perfect. Everything was perfect.

Until it wasn't.

The days were getting longer as we reached the middle of spring, so it wasn't quite dark yet when I left the supermarket in town after work, having picked up dinner for Edel and me. I'd met Theo earlier in the day for lunch, but I knew he'd been in a meeting all afternoon afterwards, so I hadn't texted him yet as I started heading home.

When my phone vibrated in my jacket pocket, I pulled it out and saw Edel's name on the screen.

"Hi," I said cheerfully after answering. "I'm just on my way home. I got us teriyaki chicken, because they didn't have—"

"Ari." Edel's voice was unsteady, and I realised I could hear a lot of background noise. "The flat's been flooded."

I stopped dead in the street, ignoring the irritated grunt of a guy who shouldered past me. "What?"

"There was a flood in the upstairs flat, and…" Edel lowered their voice to a shaky whisper. "I think the neighbour died."

My limbs tingled. I sidestepped to the doorway of a closed clothing boutique to get off the pavement and stared at an ugly patterned dress in the window.

"Died?" I croaked.

"Yes," Edel whispered. I heard the rustle of them moving, the background noise getting a little quieter. "There's a coroner here, and I heard the paramedics saying something about a heart attack."

I licked my dry lips, stepping back out onto the pavement and slowly walking down the street. "Who else is there?"

"The police. Firemen. *Everyone*." Edel gave a slightly hysterical laugh, then blew out a shaky breath. "They were already here when I got home from work. They won't let me in, but I can see through the windows that it… everything's ruined."

“Fuck.” I started walking faster. All our stuff. Everything we owned. It felt selfish and callous to focus on that when someone was potentially dead, but worry was already pounding through me. “I’ll be home in a few minutes.”

“There’s no need to rush,” Edel said miserably. “We can’t go in. We won’t be able to stay here.”

Shit, where were we going to *live?*

“Have you called Amir?” I asked, my voice a little breathless as I speed-walked down the road.

“Yes, he’s on his way. I called the landlord too. He’s coming.”

“Okay.” I’d never been more grateful for Edel’s pragmatism. “I’ll—I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I tapped off the call, then immediately called Theo.

“Hi, dimples.” His voice was warm with a smile when he answered. “You okay?”

“Um, not really,” I said unsteadily. “Edel just—Our flat’s been flooded. All our stuff is ruined.”

“What?” I heard the squeak of desk chair wheels. “How?”

“I’m not sure. They said it was from the upstairs neighbour, and that they might have d-died, but I don’t…”

“Where are you?” I could hear Theo standing up and the metallic jingle of keys being grabbed from a table.

“I’ll be home in a minute.” I could already see the flashing lights of the fire engine up ahead. My stomach sank, shoulders sagging with despair.

“I’ll meet you there. It’ll be okay, sweetheart.”

“Yeah.” I bit my lip, hurrying when I spotted Edel standing alone at the side of the road, arms wrapped tightly around their middle as they stared up at the building. “See you soon.”

I hung up and jogged the last few paces as Edel noticed me. I wrapped them up in a tight hug before pulling back, grasping their shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” They gave me a shaky smile. Their eyes were swollen from crying. “It was just a shock.”

“Yeah.” I turned to face the building, staring at all the people milling around outside. Firemen, police officers, two paramedics hanging around the back of an ambulance talking. The family who lived in the flat opposite

us on the ground floor were huddled together, their little girl crying in her dad's arms.

"Who… who died?" I said quietly. "The guy above us?"

I tried to picture him. I could only remember seeing him a few times, and we'd never spoken. I remembered him as a quiet middle-aged man with thinning hair and a beer belly.

Edel nodded, their lanky body unclenching a little when we spotted Amir hurrying towards us down the road. He hugged us both, then gently took Edel's hand and squeezed.

"Are you okay?" he asked, brown eyes kind as they flitted between us. I nodded as Edel huddled closer to him and he wrapped his arm around their back. He was a good few inches shorter than them, so they rested their cheek on the top of his head as they gazed at the building miserably.

"I know it's selfish to think about it, but…" They shook their head, box braids slipping over their shoulders. "Shit, all our *stuff*. My laptop. My graphic tablet."

"Not everything will be water-damaged." Amir rubbed their back, then tried to bring some levity by saying, "Not unless you left it all on the floor before you went to work."

"So… why…" I shook my head, staring at the building. "What caused the flood?"

"I heard the firemen saying he'd left the bath running. The steam set off the smoke alarm, but he must have already… passed away by then."

"Shit," Amir said sympathetically.

Edel wiped their hands over their face, exhaling heavily. "One of the policemen said we probably wouldn't be able to go in and get our stuff tonight. We'll have to come back."

The thrum of an engine made us all glance over. I recognised Theo's car before it came to a stop further down the road and he climbed out, face tense as his gaze swept over the crowd, trying to find me.

Edel gave me a watery smile. "There's your Bluebeard."

"Yeah, I'll—I'll be right back…" I hurried over to meet him as he began striding forward, the stupid carrier bag from the supermarket still clutched in my hand.

His eyes darkened with concern when he spotted me, and then he was tugging me into his arms. "Shit, I'm sorry, dimples."

“It’s okay.” I sniffled against his chest, then forced myself to stop. But Theo had already noticed, and he gently tugged me back to his car.

“Sit down, sweetheart.” He opened the door and guided me to sit sideways in the driver’s seat. Crouching between my legs, he smoothed his big hands up my thighs. “It’s fine. It can be fixed.”

“Yeah.” I gnawed at the side of my thumbnail anxiously. “Yeah. I have insurance. Edel can stay at Amir’s, and I’ll, um… I can—”

“You can stay with me.” Theo reached up and gently pulled my hand away from my mouth. “Or I can help you find somewhere else, but for a while at least, you can stay with me. If you want to.”

My eyes darted to his. “I—You don’t mind?”

His dark brows drew together. “Of course I don’t mind. I care about you.”

I nibbled on my lower lip, trying to not look too smitten as I gazed at him. “Really?” I asked in a small voice.

Theo rolled his eyes, lips turning up into a tiny smile. Cupping the back of my head in a big hand, he leaned up and kissed me hard.

“Yes, Ari. Really. And I want you to stay with me.” He pulled back and flashed me a brief, wolfish grin. “I can cook for you.”

I let out a watery laugh, clutching at the sleeves of his jacket. “That’d be nice.”

He slipped his arms around me and pulled me into the safe warmth of his big body. I sighed in relief, tucking my nose against the bend of his neck. His beard tickled the side of my face as I breathed in his fiery scent.

“And I can worship you every night in bed,” he murmured in my ear, his fingers threading through my hair to cup the back of my head.

I shivered from the intimate touch, lips curving up into a tiny smile against his skin. “That’d be nice too.”

I felt his chest hitch with a huff of silent laughter. He kissed my hair and held me tighter, both of us ignoring all the activity going on around us. The first responders milling about, the other building residents, the passersby gawking as they walked along the road.

“I’ll look after you, Ari.” Theo’s low voice rumbled through his chest and into mine. “If you want me to. And when you need me to.”

I didn’t know if the stress was catching up with me, but his words made my eyes water.

“Thank you,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to his throat.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

THEO

"Your reward, *mon fidèle serviteur*."

I gritted my teeth, trying to block out His deep, gravelly voice in my head as I comforted Ari. The heat of Him pressed against my back, and I barely suppressed my shudder when I felt the sting of phantom claws raking lightly down my spine through my suit jacket.

"Now you can have him with you always." His voice was faintly amused, like this was all child's play to Him. Like fucking with Ari's life was mere folly.

But all my bitter anger fled a moment later when I felt the chuff of His hot breath against the side of my neck.

"You may keep this one."

I couldn't contain my shudder that time, but Ari didn't seem to notice as he gazed worriedly at the building. Relief weakened my limbs, made heat prick at my eyes. I closed them briefly, wanting to fall to my knees in thanks for His mercy. To worship Him properly.

Thank you, I mumbled in my head, the words not enough.

He huffed in amusement, the sound ending in a beastly snort. "So very beautiful, is he not? Like a perfect bloom sprouting up among the rest of humanity's stinking weeds."

I gave a slight nod, gazing up at Ari above me.

He looked like an angel, the fire engine's lights flashing over his pale hair and smooth skin, darkening his blue eyes. I lifted his hand to press a kiss to the inside of his wrist, breathing in his scent, like clean rain and freshly picked flowers.

My chest squeezed when he looked down at me with a sad smile, reaching out to cup my cheek and trail his thumb over the edge of my beard.

I could keep him.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

We were able to go back to the flat and salvage what we could a few days later.

I had allowed myself one night of feeling sorry for myself, letting Theo dote on me even more than usual, before deciding that I was lucky I wasn't dead like the neighbour, and hadn't been taking a bath when the water from upstairs started pouring into our flat. The landlord had told Edel that the bathroom ceiling was half caved in from the weight of the water pouring over the lip of the neighbour's bath. We weren't allowed to go in there while we collected the rest of our stuff.

We met Edel and Amir at the door to the building and headed inside without saying much. The carpet grew damp as we walked down the corridor to our front door, our shoes slapping wetly. I knew the family across from us had also been displaced by the flood, though it was just their bathroom that had water damage.

Our entire flat did.

The floor was still wet as we stepped inside, but I could see the waterline along the bottom of the walls, telling us just how much had poured in from above.

"How do they get rid of all the water?" I asked in an absent mumble, wrinkling my nose at the damp smell.

A huge industrial dehumidifier hummed loudly in the living room, and the air somehow felt simultaneously dry and sticky.

"A pump," Theo said, kissing the top of my head as he moved past me to get to my bedroom. He dropped the empty suitcase he'd been carrying on

the bed, unzipping it.

Edel and Amir were already heading into their room. None of us really wanted to linger here, so I followed Theo into my bedroom and looked around blankly. I shared a wall with the bathroom, so my room had been hit harder than Edel's. The paint on the wall behind my headboard was bubbled and peeling away in clumps. My cheap particleboard nightstands were already sagging, the lamps threatening to topple off.

"Well." I exhaled heavily, dragging my feet over to Theo. "This is shit."

"It is," he agreed, pushing back my hair. "Let's get it done quick, then we can go and get some dinner with Edel and Amir. Do you want to start with clothes? We can rent a van and come back for the big stuff another day. But I think the mattress is a write-off, dimples."

I leaned into his body for a second, grateful for how calm and collected he always was. "Yeah. Clothes and stuff first."

We got to work, and I was beyond relieved that all my clothes were okay, my chest of drawers and wardrobe against the wall furthest from the bathroom. Theo chuckled when he opened a drawer and discovered my vast collection of bougie pyjamas, which managed to make me smile despite how depressing this job was. He'd already seen a few pairs I'd taken to his house, though they normally ended up in a heap on his bedroom floor.

When I started transferring all my lingerie from the drawer to the suitcase, he let out a low rumble and wrapped his arms around me from behind.

"Look on the bright side." He lowered his head to press his temple to mine, his beard tickling my cheek. "Now you get to model all of these for me." I turned my head to look at him with a wry smile, and he gave me a sweet grin back as he shrugged. "Bright side for me, at least."

He kissed my cheek and released me as I chuckled, and we continued collecting my stuff. I tried hard not to think about the poor upstairs neighbour being found dead. The landlord had told Edel some details he probably shouldn't have, because he was an old gossip who was friends with one of the firemen. Apparently the neighbour's hot tap had been running full force over the bath, and both our flats had been filled with steam when the first responders got here.

Apparently, he hadn't just had a heart attack. He'd had a heart attack *in* the bath, while being boiled alive.

I shivered, heading to the dressing table to start clearing it into the duffle bag of Theo's that we'd also brought. Soon we were zipping both bags shut, and Theo took the duffle from me before easily lifting the stuffed suitcase off the damp mattress.

His expression was tight as he looked around. "I'll help you replace anything you've lost."

I blinked in shock at the offer. "You don't have to do that. And hopefully my contents insurance will—"

"I want to." He stepped closer and cupped my chin, tilting my face up so he could kiss me. "I'll replace everything."

I chuckled nervously, smoothing down the front of his shirt. "Well, my laptop and underwear are the most expensive things I own, and they're all fine, so it's not too bad."

His face softened, and he gave me one more kiss before stepping back. "I'll take these to the car."

"Okay."

I followed him out of the bedroom and headed towards the living room as he left the flat. My feet splashed through little puddles, and I stopped and stared around the room. Sighing, I headed to the fridge and tugged it open, wrinkling my nose at the rancid smell before I remembered all the power was off, seeing as water could have got into the electrical circuit. The big dehumidifier in here was being powered by a thick cable running from a cracked open window to a generator outside.

Opening one of the kitchen cabinets, I stared at all the tins and packets of dry goods inside.

"Edel?" I called. "Do you want to take all the food?"

It was Amir who popped his head out from their room, face brightening. "Really?"

I smiled weakly and nodded, gesturing at the fridge. "But the stuff in the fridge is going bad. Are we—um, are we meant to clear it out?"

"Fuck that," Edel declared as they emerged from their room behind Amir. "The landlord can deal with that stuff. He'll probably have to replace it anyway."

I nodded, gazing bleakly at the cabinets. "What about all the plates and cups and stuff? What do we do with those? And the TV. I think some of the furniture's probably ruined."

Even thinking about packing everything up was exhausting, especially as neither of us had anywhere to put it.

"My cousin's got a van," Amir said easily. "He and my brother are going to come and move all the bigger stuff tomorrow. He said he'll store it in his garage."

My shoulders unclenched a little as I smiled at him. "That's great. Thank you so much. Do they need a hand tomorrow?"

"Nah, they'll handle it." He waved a hand. "I can pop by to help."

Edel smiled affectionately and leaned into Amir just as Theo appeared in the hallway behind them, dark eyes finding mine.

"Are you all done?" Amir asked, wrapping his arm around Edel's waist. "Want to go get something to eat? Maybe get drunk to forget about all this shittiness?"

Theo had suggested going for dinner with them, but all I wanted was to go back to his and take a long bath then get into bed. Being here was affecting me more than I was letting on. Edel and I had lived here for years. Even though it was just stuff, it was kind of heartbreaking to see it all ruined, the cheap sofas we'd bought together damp and musty, the legs of the coffee table we'd lugged home from a second-hand shop swollen with water.

"Maybe next weekend?" I suggested, glancing up at Theo as he came to stop beside me and tugged me closer. I shot him a tiny smile, and his eyes softened as he reached up and rubbed his thumb over my dimple.

"*Mein Gott,* you two are the cutest," Edel said in fake exasperation, giving me a teasing smile as my cheeks heated. "Take him home and spoil him, Theo. We'll see you next weekend."

"Well, maybe we can meet up for lunch in the week or something," I said hurriedly as they ducked into their bedroom to grab their bags before following us to the front door.

It had only just hit me that I wouldn't be living with Edel anymore, at least for a while. My eyes got blurry, and I tried to hide my sniffle, feeling embarrassed.

"*Ach, Engel.*" They pulled me into a tight hug, but when they released me their deep brown eyes were glassy too. "We'll still see each other all the time. And maybe they'll get the place fixed up fast and we'll be back here before you know it."

“Yeah, maybe,” I mumbled, stepping back into the warmth of Theo’s chest. He slid an arm loosely around my waist, thumb stroking my hipbone through my shirt.

Gently turning me towards the door, he led me out, Edel locking up behind us. I hugged them again when we got to our cars, inhaling their patchouli scent and trying to hide the way my eyes prickled again.

We waved as we got into our respective cars before Amir drove off, but Theo didn’t start the engine.

“I’m sorry, Ari,” he said quietly, staring at the steering wheel.

My brows twitched into a frown as I glanced over. “Sorry? Why?”

“I just…” He shrugged helplessly and shook his head. “I feel guilty. I’m sorry this happened to you.”

I froze, then let out a little laugh as I reached over to tangle my fingers with his. “Don’t be silly. You can’t feel guilty for this. And it’s fine—it’s just stuff. Like you said, it can be fixed. I’ll miss Edel, but…”

My chin wobbled, so I clamped my lower lip between my teeth. Theo looked over at me, brows drawn. He leaned across the gearbox to hug me.

“Don’t cry, dimples.” Tucking my hair behind my ear, he kept his face close to mine and stroked my cheek with his thumb. “Edel can come over whenever they want.”

I laughed tearfully. “Edel doesn’t have a car, and you live in the middle of nowhere.”

“Then I’ll come and pick them up whenever you want to see them,” he said with a note of finality, sitting back to start the car. “Whatever you want, Ari. Whatever will make you feel better, I’ll do it.”

My throat ached for a different reason as I tipped my head back against the headrest. I smiled over at him as he backed out of the space into the road.

“Will you make me that pasta dish I like when we get home?” I asked, because I didn’t like the unhappy furrow in his brow as he drove.

His expression cleared a little, and he glanced over at me with a smile. “Of course, dimples.”

“And your chocolate mousse?”

He huffed in amusement, then reached over to grab my hand so he could lift it to his mouth, kissing my knuckles reverently. “Whatever you want, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

We slipped into a new routine easily.

Theo drove me to work every morning and picked me up at the end of the day. I briefly considered getting my own car—I could drive, I just hadn't needed to while working and living in town—but I knew I wouldn't be able to afford it, so I didn't mention it to Theo.

He worked in his office after dropping me off, or he'd go to the gym before heading back home so Athena wasn't alone all day. The first morning he'd wandered into the front hall wearing grey sweatpants as I'd been putting on my jacket to leave, his hair shoved back into a messy bun, eyes tired and keys jangling from his fingers, I'd been late for work. I hadn't been able to stop myself from lunging at him.

A week or so after the flood, I booked some time off from work to decompress and process all the recent changes. I was kind of a creature of habit, so while I loved being with Theo so much, I still missed Edel fiercely. I even missed the flat, though the last couple of months there had been less pleasant thanks to the ghost.

I'd hoped the ghost would go away after I moved out. But it didn't. It had followed me here, and it was getting worse, even though it had seemed to like me being here before. I'd wake up in the middle of the night to feel hot, chuffing breaths puffing over my face. I'd hear strange sounds echoing from downstairs, even when Athena was snoring next to the bed. I heard faint triple knocks in the walls and under the floors, but Theo had told me the pipes here were old, so I tried to pretend that was all it was.

One night, I woke up and thought I could feel thick claws trailing lightly down my legs through the duvet cover. I hadn't been able to stop myself from scrambling up in terror that time, jerking Theo awake as I huddled against the headboard, sucking in panicked breaths.

He'd gathered me in his arms, trying to calm me and asking me what was wrong. I'd told him I'd had a nightmare.

A small part of me was still trying to convince myself that even if there was a ghost, it couldn't have been… bad. Didn't dogs react badly to stuff like that? Athena never did. She never growled at empty corners. Her hackles never rose. She was her cheerful, dopey self all the time, even when she was in the room with me when I thought I saw bulky shadows shifting in my periphery. Looming shapes melting up from the floor. Black masses hovering in the ceiling corners.

Sometimes, when I was feeling particularly on edge, I wanted to snap at Theo and ask how he couldn't *see* it. How could he not see the figure moving in the doorway when we were watching TV in the sitting room? How could he not wake up and hear it when something was clomping around in the front hall, like the manic, feverish pacing of heavy hooves?

A few times, I nearly told him. Nearly blurted out everything that I was seeing, but he wasn't seeing it with me, and what did that mean for me? I'd just moved into his house. What if he started worrying that I was unstable? Or if he did believe in the supernatural, what if he decided he didn't want to be with someone who clearly had something attached to them, infecting his house?

What if he stopped wanting me?

Besides, when the ghost wasn't around, everything was perfect. We were approaching summer, and Theo's house looked even more stunning than it had before. The gardens were teeming with flowers, and whenever I sat under the honeysuckle on the patio, I could smell the comforting scents of Theo's herb garden tucked around the side of the kitchen. Mint and rosemary and sage and thyme. They were the only plants Theo looked after himself, with the gardener taking care of everything else.

I finally met the gardener on my week off. She came on Wednesdays, so I'd never been around to see her before. Theo had left for the gym a little while earlier, and I'd decided to start my morning with a long, lazy bath. It was hot, so I got dressed in some loose, flowy high-waisted trousers and a

crop top before heading downstairs and into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

As I padded barefoot out onto the patio, I froze when I saw a figure bent over one of the rose bushes. When they straightened up and looked over at the sound of the door opening, I saw it was a woman with short dark hair wearing a white tank top and grass-stained khakis under an old leather utility belt laden with gardening tools.

“Oh, hi!” she called over, lifting a hand covered by a thick gardening glove to give me a wave as she tucked her trowel into her belt. “Theo mentioned I might get to meet you today before he left.”

“Hi!” I called back, quickly patting my hair to make sure it wasn’t too messy in the haphazard bun I’d thrown it into after my bath.

Athena had been lying on her back in a patch of sun on the patio, but she twisted herself round and stretched as the gardener approached. I made my way down the stone steps to meet her halfway.

“Lisa,” she said with a beaming smile as she stripped off her glove and held out her hand.

“Ari. Lovely to meet you.” I shook her hand and smiled back. Her fingers were a little sweaty from the glove, and this close I could see moisture dampening the short hair at her temples. Her skin was tanned, no doubt from being outside so much, and a swathe of freckles dotted her nose and cheekbones.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked, reaching down to stroke Athena’s head when she leaned her weight against my legs.

“Yes please.” Lisa followed me into the house, stamping her boots before stepping inside to get rid of any dirt. “I have to mow the grass today. I hope it doesn’t disturb you too much.”

“Oh no, don’t worry.” I waved a hand as we made our way into the kitchen. “I’m not working this week. I don’t really know what to do with my time,” I added with a chuckle. “I’m not used to not working.”

“What do you do?” she asked politely, stopping at the island and stripping off her other glove.

“I’m a florist.” I smiled over at her as I got a glass from the cupboard and saw her face brighten with interest.

“Oh, lovely. I hope the garden is up to standard.” She chuckled and gratefully accepted the glass I handed to her, leaving her gloves on the island to take a deep drink.

“The garden is gorgeous,” I gushed.

She lowered the glass with a satisfied sigh and beamed at me again. “Well, thank you. I had a good foundation to build on when I started working here.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Ooh, a good few years now.”

“Did you design the winter garden?” I asked with a shy smile. “It’s beautiful.”

Her eyes perked up. “Yes, I did! Do you like it?”

“I love it. Theo has to drag me out of there some evenings so I actually eat dinner.” I chuckled.

“Oh, I’m so pleased. And it’s nice to see someone else here with Theo, enjoying this beautiful house.” She smiled at me and picked up her gloves. “Well, best get back to work. Thank you for the water.”

“No problem.” I followed her out of the kitchen. “Oh, hey. I was wondering—how did you get the wisteria on the front of the house to bloom so early? It was already flowering when I came here in March.”

Lisa glanced over with a chuckle as we walked, but a little frown pinched her eyebrows together. “You know, it’s weird. It was obviously already there when I started working here—wisteria takes so long to grow—but it stays in bloom all year. Which *should* be impossible.”

“Do you treat it with something?”

Lisa’s narrow shoulders rose in a little shrug. “Nope. Honestly, I barely touch it. Just cut it back so it doesn’t cover the windows or get into the guttering. Every now and then it’ll look like it’s starting to die off—like it’s got rot in the roots or a disease. But it’s always perked back up again by the time I come back. It basically looks after itself.”

“Huh.”

“I don’t know if there’s something in the soil here, but a lot of flowers come up and bloom at times they shouldn’t.” We stepped back out into the bright sunlight, and I lifted a hand to shield my eyes so I could still see her. “And some won’t grow at all. We never get clover or daisies on the lawn. And no matter how many different types of lilies I try to grow, none of them ever take. Nor do passionflowers or white tulips. Every other colour and kind of tulip? No problem. But the white ones either never come up or they flower for a day, then fall apart.”

I blinked. “Oh, right.”

Lisa chuckled. “Sorry, just passionate.”

I laughed. “I understand. Well, if you ever want some lilies to take home, I can bring a bunch for you from work.”

She smiled at me. “That’s sweet, thank you.”

I let out a self-conscious little laugh and took a step back, curling my bare toes on the warm patio. “Well, I’ll let you get back to work. Um, help yourself to another drink if you need it. It’s hot today.”

“Thank you, I will.” She patted Athena’s head as she turned and headed down the steps onto the lawn, whistling cheerfully.

I’d been planning on sitting outside, but the thought of lounging around on the patio while Lisa worked in the hot sun made me feel a little uncomfortable, so I headed back into the sitting room and flopped down on the couch in front of the TV.

It was cool and shady in here, and my vision took a few seconds to adjust after the bright sunlight outside. When something moved in my periphery, something big and dark, I studiously ignored both it and the little stab of terror that made my pulse speed up. Lying down on the sofa, I put on a random TV show and fixed my eyes on the screen, trying to focus on the drone of the actors’ voices and the comforting sounds of Lisa pottering around in the garden.

I dozed off at some point, and I had the most unsettling dream. Unsettling, because it should have been horrifying, but horror was not what I felt.

Dark shadow covered me in a blanket where I lay on the sofa, incorporeal and weightless, like thick black smoke, the scent of burning stinging my nostrils. Then it solidified. Heaviness pressed down on me, and a hideous face was suddenly inches from mine. Wide, sharp horns jutted up into the air. Solid black eyes with pinprick white pupils stared down at me. It looked like a deformed bull, with a flat, squashed face and a thick ring piercing its septum between wide nostrils.

Hot breath wafted over my face as it chuffed, stinking of charred earth, smoking wood and boiling steam.

Then it spoke.

“Such a delicate bloom.” Its voice throbbed through my skull, pounding behind my eyes. “I can see it. Why he wants you so much.”

My body reacted in the most confusing way when it leaned closer and snuffled at my jaw. It suddenly felt like I wasn’t wearing anything at all,

and slippery shadows and hot fur were rubbing against my bare skin, teasing me.

"I think I want you too, little one," it rasped against my neck.

I gasped, legs spreading on their own, my head tilting back to bare my throat to it. To this thing, this monstrous creature that should have instilled nothing but revulsion and terror in me, but I could feel my body reacting, my cock hardening in a rush.

My hips flexed, and the thing chuffed against my neck. I felt the sting of something sharp. The wet slide of a heated tongue, wide and flat. I shuddered, hips moving frantically now. I tried to lift my arms, to wrap them around this hideous beast, but they felt too heavy to move, pinned down against the soft sofa cushions I could only barely feel underneath me.

As I let out a pleading mewl, I jerked awake. Blinking rapidly in the sudden daylight, I struggled to sit up, my chest heaving, heart still thudding hard.

Looking down, I stared in horror at the straining length of my dick under the loose, soft fabric of my trousers. There was a wet patch staining the light material, and my cock throbbed like it was on the brink of release.

I jumped violently when the lawn mower suddenly started up outside. God, how *mortifying*. I'd been having a wet dream while Lisa was just outside. A terrifying, confusing wet dream that should *not* have affected me in that way.

Standing up on shaky legs, I hurriedly left the sitting room to go upstairs and get changed before Theo got home.

The faint scent of the earth burning followed me.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Theo worked from home the next day, though he didn't actually do much work. We spent the day by the pool, and once he had assured me that Lisa wouldn't be coming back today and no one else would show up, I stripped down to nothing to lounge on a sunbed while he swam laps naked.

He chuckled when I still insisted on sitting under a parasol and covering every inch of myself in high-factor sunscreen—until I rolled onto my front and demurely asked him if he would get my back. Resting my cheek on my folded arms, I watched him stalk out of the water, his cock already half hard as it swung between his thick thighs. When he straddled the tops of my legs and started smoothing sunscreen onto my back, I sighed and closed my eyes, breathing in the tropical scent of sun and coconut.

"Bet you give good massages," I mumbled, and Theo huffed in amusement as he moved lower to rub sunscreen into my backside. He didn't necessarily *need* to slide his palm between my cheeks, but I wasn't complaining.

"I'll give you a massage if you want." He moved back to sit at the foot of the sunbed so he could reach my legs.

My breath hitched when long, coated fingers slipped up my inner thigh and grazed my sac, but then his hands were moving again, thumbs swiping over the crease of my cheeks and briefly spreading me, exposing me to his gaze.

My cock twitched against the padded cushion. His hands smoothed down my legs, tickling the backs of my knees before he rasped, "Turn over."

I grinned and flipped onto my back, reaching over to grab my sunglasses from the side table and slip them on. “I already got my front.”

He tutted disapprovingly, trailing idle fingers up and down my calf. “Leave it for me next time, dimples.”

“Okay.” I grinned at him and stretched my arms, letting them fall onto the crown of my head. Gaze trailing over the water droplets clinging to Theo’s beard, I teasingly asked, “Doesn’t the pool water make the dye go weird?”

His mouth quirked into a wry smile as he shrugged. “Getting it redyed tomorrow anyway.”

He got up to stretch out on the lounger beside me, not bothering with sunscreen even though he was lying in full sun. I quirked a brow but said nothing. Wasn’t he worried about his dick getting sunburnt?

I shuddered at the thought and flipped the edge of my towel over my lap, even though I was in the shade. My cock was half hard from having his hands all over me, my nipples peaked despite the heat. He must have noticed, but I didn’t mention it because he looked so relaxed. It wasn’t his fault that I was so horny for him all the time. Except it kind of was. He was just too sexy.

I greedily took in the sight of his big body stretched out beside me. The tanned skin decorated with faded blue tattoo ink. The dark hair scattered over his chest and trailing down his soft belly. The strong thighs and gorgeous cock in between, ruddy and thick even when soft.

My own dick lurched under the towel, so I quickly closed my eyes and leaned my head back, trying to calm my body down.

Until he said, “Hey, dimples.”

Opening my eyes, I rolled my head on the padded cushion to look at him.

His eyes were still shut, face tilted up to the sun, but a tiny grin tipped up his mouth as he said, “Want to come sit on my face?”

I was eagerly scrambling up from the sun bed before he’d even finished speaking.

A COOL BREEZE wafted over us as the sun dipped lower in the sky, making me shiver and curl up tighter against Theo on the sun lounger. His skin was still hot, damp with perspiration where it pressed against mine. Long fingers sifted absently through my hair as I rested my cheek on his chest.

I was half asleep, my body sated and still loose from my orgasm. I hadn't slept well the night before, scared I'd have another horrible, arousing dream.

I hadn't told Theo. Honestly, I was too embarrassed. That I nearly came in my sleep dreaming about a horrifying, demonic bullman lying on top of me? I'd never put much stock in dreams and their meanings, but that one had felt different. Almost like it hadn't even been my mind thinking it up, but something else. Some outside force.

Had it been my ghost? It hadn't looked like a ghost, not that I knew what ghosts were supposed to look like. It had looked… worse.

Demon, an oily little voice whispered in my head, so I quickly sat up to get rid of it.

Theo let out a tiny snort as he came to from a light doze, blinking blearily in the dying sun. "You okay, dimples?"

"Just getting cold." I picked up my phone and bundle of clothes, then turned to face him with a smile. "I'm going to take a shower to rinse off the sunscreen."

Theo nodded and stretched contentedly like a big cat. A hand slipped down to scratch idly at his belly. "I'll start making dinner."

Affection bubbled over inside me, and something deeper that made me want to cling to him and never let go. Placing a hand beside his head on the sun lounger, I leaned down to kiss him. Bristles tickled my face, and the crisp scent of his beard oil was stronger than normal thanks to the heat.

Dipping my head, I pressed another kiss to his chest, then one on his belly. With a coy smile, I placed a final kiss on his relaxed cock, which had been down my throat not that long ago while he ate me out like he was starving.

I felt a warm palm slide tantalisingly up the back of my leg, so I darted away from his seeking hands with a laugh and headed inside. It seemed dark in the sitting room after being outside in the sun for so long, and my eyes took a few seconds to adjust. I froze when a rhythmic thudding came from my left, muscles locking up in panic, before the white spots cleared

and I realised it was just Athena thumping her tail against the floor at the sight of me, her head lifting where she was curled up on the cool tiles.

"We'll take you for a walk once it's cooler, girly," I told her, which was the wrong thing to say.

Claws scrabbled madly over the tiles at the word *walk*, and she bounded over and barked excitedly. I laughed, stepping back as she tried to jump up, shielding my junk with my bundle of clothes.

"You just had to say that word," Theo groaned jokingly as he came inside, dressed in his shorts and an old t shirt. He leaned down to scoop up Athena's tennis ball, flinging it through the open doors so she raced after it.

"Sorry." I laughed, padding to the door. "Forgot the power of the W word."

He gave my ass a light smack as we headed into the front hall. His bare feet slapped against the tiles as he walked to the kitchen, yawning and scrubbing a hand through his hair, while I made my way upstairs to take a shower.

The bedroom was dim and cool as I dumped my bundle of clothes on the bed to deal with after my shower. I was still living mostly out of the suitcase, because putting my stuff in drawers felt final in a way that was terrifying and exhilarating all at once, even though Theo had offered. I worried that he'd think I assumed our living situation was permanent, or that I was trying to insert myself fully into his life—his home—for an easy ride.

Not that I'd asked for my flat to be flooded, and not that I'd asked to stay here—he'd offered. But I didn't want to do anything that would risk what we had growing between us.

And that was partly why I didn't tell him about the things I saw and heard. About the dream. I didn't want him to think I was a negative force in his life, when his life already seemed so perfect. The beautiful house. The dog. The successful career.

I didn't want him to think I was bad luck, or a total mess who thought he saw shadows everywhere and heard voices and dreamed about monstrous creatures crooning sweet words in his ear.

I didn't want to ruin anything.

My body was loose and pleasantly tired from sex and sun as I got into the shower. Shoulders sagging with relief under the hot spray, I slicked my hair back, tilting my head up to let the water pummel my face. My skin was

slippery with sunscreen as I started washing, relaxing with the monotony of the task.

And then I smelled it, over the lavender scent of the body wash.

Fire. Smoke and ash. Steam that smelled different from the hot water coming from the shower head.

I squeezed my eyes shut just as a black shadow seeped under the closed bathroom door, my chin trembling.

"Please go away," I whispered, my voice quaking.

When I realised what I had done—that I had outwardly acknowledged it for the first time—panic made me start to shake. The air seemed to swell in the room, steam thickening, choking me. Something heavy slammed on the bathroom tiles. The inhumanly rapid clop of hooves rushing up on me.

The glow of the lights against my eyelids vanished, like the room had been plunged into darkness. I jumped when something caressed my stomach, something that wasn't water, sharp and prickling but incorporeal.

I jerked back and nearly slipped. Crouching down on trembling legs, I tried to make myself as small as possible. I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't, because hot, snarling breaths were hitting my face, and the weight of something huge and hulking pressed against my side.

"*Ari*," it whispered inside my head, making me let out a weak sob.

And then in an instant, it was gone. The voice. The breaths. The sapping energy. Light glowed through my eyelids again, but I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes. I cried, trying to keep quiet, snot and tears mingling with the hot water raining down on me, plastering my hair to my face.

After a few minutes, I found the courage to peek my eyes open. It didn't make me feel any better to see the bathroom looking the same as it always had, because that meant nothing. Something had been in here with me. Something had said my fucking *name*.

My legs shook wildly as I stood and hastily finished washing. I scrubbed roughly at my eyes, hoping Theo wouldn't notice that they were red and swollen, or hoping he'd believe me when I told him I'd got shampoo in them.

Hoping he wouldn't realise that the man he'd invited into his home was losing his mind.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

Despite how unsettled I was, I fell asleep quickly that night, exhausted from too much sun and crying in the shower and my poor sleep the night before. Theo's arms around me and his big body spooning me from behind made me feel safe enough to close my eyes, and I felt myself drop into a hard sleep.

When I woke up, he was gone.

The room was still dark when my eyes cracked open. Closing them again with a tired groan, I rolled over sluggishly and reached out for Theo. When my hand patted over nothing but cool, empty sheets, my brows pinched.

Struggling up onto one arm, I rubbed the grit out of my eyes and peered blearily into the dark room. The house was completely silent, until I realised there *was* a sound. A single, faint sound, echoing from downstairs.

My heart stuttered, ears straining as I tried to make out what it was. It wasn't a sound I'd heard before—wasn't one of the ones my ghost usually made. This was a low rasp, stopping and starting every few seconds. Almost like… someone sanding down wood in long, steady strokes.

Or like fabric dragging over a surface, I realised a second later. And it sounded heavy—like something heavy being dragged.

Terror for Theo whited out my vision, giving me the courage to scramble out of bed. What if—What if the ghost had got Theo? What if something had happened to him?

"Theo?" I called, my voice hysterical as I skidded out of the bedroom. I almost slipped when I thudded too fast down the stairs.

He appeared at the bottom step, breathing fast as if he'd just sprinted after hearing my frantic tone.

"What's wrong?" he urged, grasping my shoulders when I reached him and tracking his gaze worriedly down my frame. "Are you okay?"

I sagged against him, going hot with embarrassment now that he was here in front of me, whole and safe and sturdy. But his skin was ice cold, and I shivered as he wrapped his arm around me.

"I thought—I heard something and you weren't in bed." I felt so stupid. Had I honestly thought a *ghost* had somehow hurt Theo? What was wrong with me?

There was just enough moonlight coming in through the windows for me to see his eyes soften. He cupped the back of my head and kissed my cheek, his nose freezing. "It's okay, sweetheart. What—uh, what did you hear?"

"It sounded like something being dragged." I shivered again, his cold skin sapping all the warmth from my body.

"It was just Athena dragging her bed across the hall."

I blinked. "Was it?"

"Yeah." Theo chuckled, smoothing my hair back before guiding me up the stairs. "She does that sometimes."

"Oh." Maybe that explained some of the weird sounds I'd been hearing. Maybe Edel had been right that time I'd asked them if they believed in ghosts—maybe everything had a logical answer.

"Why are you so cold?" I mumbled as he led me back to bed.

"Athena was whining, so I got up to let her out to pee." He pulled the covers over me, but didn't climb into bed. "I was waiting by the back door when I heard you call for me."

"Oh." I started to relax, but then my eyes popped open. I looked up at Theo, sitting beside me on the edge of the bed. "I thought you said she was dragging her bed over the floor."

His face was calm in the dark as he reached out and smoothed his thumb over my cheek. "She was."

"So why were you still waiting by the door for her?"

He chuckled, giving an easy shrug. "She must have slipped back in when I wasn't looking. I could hear a fox, so I was trying to spot it. She's nearly been attacked by a fox before."

I nodded, but I still felt uneasy. "Aren't you getting into bed?"

“I left the back door open when I came running.” He leaned down to kiss me. “I’ll be one minute, okay?”

“Okay.” I curled up on my side and watched him pad out of the room. Thirty seconds later I heard a door being closed and the jangle of metal as it was locked.

I didn’t fully relax until Theo was back in bed with me, his skin warming up as he pulled me onto his chest and slipped his fingers through my hair. I exhaled, wiry hair tickling my cheek as I wrapped my arm around his middle and slipped a leg between his.

“Sorry I panicked,” I mumbled. “I was worried you were hurt.”

Theo let out a long breath, pressing his lips to my hair and leaving them there as he inhaled my scent. He held me tighter.

“Don’t be sorry, dimples,” he croaked. “Go back to sleep. Everything’s fine.”

As my week off came to an end, I couldn’t decide if I was dreading returning to the mundanity of work or looking forward to getting back into my routine.

Theo came home on Friday with his hair trimmed and beard freshly dyed, looking more handsome than ever. It was a brilliant cobalt now that made me realise how much it had faded over the last few weeks. I was so used to seeing him every day, I hadn’t noticed.

After we ate dinner on the patio, I went upstairs to have a bath while Theo sat in the living room going over some work documents. As I padded into the bedroom towel-drying my hair, my gaze landed on all of my silky, lacy lingerie spilling out of my suitcase.

Biting my lip around a smile, I headed over and crouched down to sift through it. Deciding on a lace set in blood red, I carefully laid it out on the bed before drying off. After glancing furtively at the door to make sure Theo wasn’t coming upstairs, I started getting dressed.

The bralette skimmed my flat chest, its lacy edge sitting against my ribs. The panties had a Brazilian thong back, cutting across my cheeks, and I

twisted in front of the mirror to make sure my ass looked good in them. Of course it did.

I tugged on the garter belt until it sat comfortably around my waist, the straps dangling against my thighs as I started smoothing the stockings up my legs. I shivered, imagining how Theo was going to react. I'd never worn a full lingerie set for him, but I was pretty sure he was going to enjoy it.

At the last minute I decided to throw on one of my sheer robes, with wide, billowing sleeves edged in lace and a delicate ribbon to tie it up at the front. I left it open and padded into the hallway on my stockinged feet, pausing for a moment to make sure Theo wasn't coming up the stairs.

I crept downstairs and across the front hall to the sitting room. I could see Theo sitting on one of the sofas in the middle of the room, his back to me, dark head bent as he looked at something in his hands. His hair was still back in a knot, but tendrils had come loose to brush over the vulnerable nape of his neck.

I tiptoed up behind him, hoping he wouldn't hear the quiet swish of my stockinged thighs rubbing together. His head jerked up when I leaned over the back of the sofa, sliding my hands over his shoulders and down his chest.

"Busy?" I murmured, pressing my temple to his.

He chuckled, shifting the loose documents off his lap and onto the couch cushion. "Depends."

"On what?" I dipped my head to kiss his neck.

"On whether you're wearing anything else with that robe."

Glancing up with a smirk, I realised he could see me in the reflection of the window opposite, the sky outside almost dark. But my body was covered by him and the sofa, so his gaze wasn't able to take in much as it roamed over my reflection hungrily.

I gave him a sweet smile. "Would you prefer the answer to be nothing, or something?"

His mouth tipped up. "I've never been a man who took anything for granted. Why don't you show me, dimples?"

Straightening up, I walked slowly around the sofa and wanted to preen when his eyes flared as he took me in, his fingers flexing in his lap.

He swallowed, throat bobbing under his vibrant beard. "Fuck, Ari."

I aimed for seductive as I delicately slid a leg over his lap and straddled him, trying to make sure my long robe didn't get caught under my knee. His

hands immediately roamed up my thighs, thumbs tracing over two of the garter straps to the lacy edge of my panties.

Our lips met in a hungry kiss as I wrapped my arms loosely around his neck. My cock was already stiffening up, and I could feel Theo getting hard in a rush beneath my ass. I broke the kiss to gaze at him, already breathing faster.

“Want to tie me up?” I asked, biting my lip when Theo’s dark eyes flared with lust.

Without saying a word, he lifted me off the sofa and started carrying me towards the stairs.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

I found myself chained to his bed less than ten minutes later.

I'd settled on 'magnolia' as my safeword before Theo had coaxed me down onto the bed with deep kisses and gently stretched my arms out to the two corner posts.

The cuffs were soft around my wrists, but tight, and the chains securing me to the bed posts were cold as I wrapped my fingers around them. I was trembling with lust and a tiny hint of nerves as I watched Theo get undressed, then calmly walk round the bed to retrieve lube and condoms—several condoms.

I gulped, legs shifting impatiently over the sheets. They weren't restrained, which meant I could spread them eagerly when Theo knelt on the mattress at the foot of the bed.

I watched his big, tattooed hands slide up my calves, calluses catching on the sheer fabric and making me shiver. His thick cock bucked between his legs as he made his way higher, thumbs slipping under the straps of my garter and sliding all the way up to my panties.

His deep brown eyes flicked up to meet mine as he leaned down, kissing my cock through the lace. It jerked in response, straining for him.

"Can we take these off and leave everything else on?" he rasped, rearranging my cock under the panties until the head poked up. He started licking and sucking it, making my thighs tremble and press into his sides. I could feel his beard tickling my balls through the lace, making me grit my teeth to stave off a moan.

I swallowed, trying to hide how fast I was already breathing, and let out a hoarse laugh. "You'll have to cut them off."

It was a joke. A lie. He could just undo the garter straps from the stockings. But a part of me—the stupid, reckless yet scared part—wanted to test him. To see what he did or said in response.

Theo quirked a brow up at me as the tip of his tongue licked my sensitive V. He sat up and leaned over to the nightstand, his cock bobbing between his legs, pre-cum threading from the tip onto the bed. I clenched my fingers around the chains at the sight of it.

When he sat back, I stared in disbelief at the small flip knife in his hand, the handle a deep marbled black, the blade already free. My heart gave a mighty lurch.

"Why—why do you have a knife in there?"

He just shrugged one shoulder, watching me.

Waiting for my permission.

I licked my lips, eyeing the blade. It was sharp.

"I…" I flicked my gaze back up to him. "Be careful. And you have to buy me a new pair."

"I'll buy you whatever you want," he said, already lowering the knife.

I managed not to flinch when I felt the cold metal against my hip. For a brief, terrifying moment, I pictured him plunging the blade deep into my belly. Slicing me open from hip to hip. Grinning up at me, his teeth gleaming white in the depths of his blue beard as he ripped my entrails out of my body.

I felt the lace come loose at my hip, my body strung tight with tension but my cock still achingly stiff. Theo leaned down and kissed my hip, then trailed his tongue inward as he sliced through the other side of the panties, not even looking at what he was doing.

My breath left me in a relieved rush when he tucked the blade into the handle and threw the knife off the bed. He was sucking my cock into his mouth before he'd even pulled the ruined panties away, tugging the material free from under my ass. I inhaled sharply, hips lifting and twitching as his beard rasped over my balls.

With one last lingering suck, he sat up and gripped my hips, kneeling between my legs. His cock jerked, eyes flaring with heat as he looked me over.

"Much better." He shot me a wolfish smile, skimming his palms up and down my stockinged thighs.

“Yeah?” I managed to smirk, even though my heart was hammering, a touch of fear still lingering under the heavy throb of arousal. He was just… so much. “So what are you going to do about it now?”

“Whatever you want.” He stretched out over me and kissed my neck, then my chin, making his way up to my mouth. “You want to come down my throat? Want me to eat your ass until you come without me even touching your cock?”

I couldn’t answer at first, my breaths trembling against his mouth, my cock pulsing and leaking pre-cum everywhere.

“Or…” Theo gave me a slow kiss, a hand creeping between us to thumb my slick tip, making me shudder. “Do you want me to fuck you while you lie there helpless, until I finally let you come after I’m done with you?”

Fuck. I wanted all of it. Everything. My body was greedy for him—it couldn’t decide what it craved the most. My cock flexed as I imagined his tongue sliding over it. My hole clenched at the thought of him fucking me with his big, pierced dick while I lay there chained down, having to take everything he gave me, the weight of his heavy body pinning my hips to the bed.

That. Shit, right now, I wanted *that*. I wanted to be fucked so hard I forgot everything else.

“Fuck me,” I rasped, my belly tightening when I saw lust flare hot in his eyes. He kissed me, sliding his pierced tongue into my mouth.

“Hard,” I added in a muffled mumble against his lips, which made him huff a tiny laugh.

“I know, dimples.”

Making his way back down my body, he kissed the centre of my chest between the lace edges of the bralette before dropping another tender kiss on my navel, making my belly dip with sensitivity. He lavished attention over my cock before making his way lower to my sac as his hands slid down my thighs.

I gasped when he cupped the backs of my knees and pushed my legs up into the air, folding my body enough that he could reach my hole. My eyes fluttered shut at the first slide of his pierced tongue, fingers clutching at the chains, my lips parting around breathy moans.

His tongue pushed inside, and he groaned against me as I clenched around the intrusion, his hands sliding up and down the backs of my

stockinged thighs. I was panting already, chest heaving, my cock leaking onto the garter belt and darkening a little spot of the fabric.

I jerked with a gasp when Theo's mouth trailed to the back of my thigh and he bit down hard enough to leave a mark. My toes flexed in the sheer fabric, and I shuddered when he returned to my hole to give it a lingering lick.

He sat up and reached for the lube, holding one of my legs up once his fingers were coated. His hand flexed around the back of my knee while the other dipped down, and I moaned when I felt the cool, wet slide of his fingers on my hole.

He pushed one in immediately, dark eyes holding mine as I lifted my head to gaze at him pleadingly.

"You want to get fucked hard?"

I nodded, gaze dropping to watch his finger thrust inside me. I hooked my other leg over his shoulder, tilting my hips more so I could get a better view.

Theo groaned, sinking in a second and making my breath hitch. His voice was low when he asked, "You like watching me finger you?"

"Y-yes," I whispered, hips straining. My cock leapt against my belly when he crooked his fingers inside me and slid the tips over my prostate. I whined, fingers restlessly gripping the chains. "Theo."

"You can watch me fuck you." He eased his fingers out and reached for a condom, dark eyes flicking up to meet mine. "But you're not going to come until I'm done with you, are you?"

I whimpered, my hips writhing as my hole clenched around nothing. "N-no."

"Sure?" He smirked at me as he finished rolling on the condom, slicking it with more lube. Then his slippery hand curled around my straining cock, making me choke on a breath. "You're so hard already. Sure you're not going to come?"

"I—I'm—" I cried out when he pushed a finger back inside, and then his fist started a slow glide up and down my cock. My body tried to curl inward to escape the pleasure coursing through me, knowing it wouldn't take much for me to come.

His fist sped up as he teased my prostate, until I couldn't catch my breath and my hips were bucking up into his hand. As my head craned back and I started to shake, he let go, finger sliding free.

“P-please,” I panted, trembling as I lifted my head to gaze at him, my brows pinched with desperation. “Please fuck me. I p-promise I won’t come.”

Theo’s hands cupped my ass, lifting it higher. “Good boy.”

I shuddered as the head of his cock popped inside, my legs splayed wide over the crooks of his elbows. Once he’d sunk his full length inside me, he leaned forward, pushing my calves up onto his shoulders. One hand keeping him suspended above me, he cupped the back of my head with the other, easing it up until my chin rested on my chest. My arms stretched further, shoulders aching.

“Watch me fuck you, Ari.”

I sucked in hectic breaths, staring as his cock started sliding in and out of me. Dark against my pale skin, the condom glistening with lube. I wished he wasn’t wearing one. I wanted to have him fuck me knowing his bare cock was inside me. I wanted to feel it flex as he came and know he was leaving a part of himself with me, every time we did this.

Now was not the time to bring that up though, especially as I couldn’t even speak. I could barely breathe. My moans got louder and louder as Theo’s hips sped up until he was pounding his cock inside me, fingers digging into my scalp and pulling at my hair as he groaned.

His orgasm seemed to take him by surprise, hips stuttering and a clipped shout tearing from his throat. I moaned low at the sight of his cock flexing at the base, the length buried inside me.

Breathing hard, he sat back and eased my legs off his shoulders, sliding his palms down my thighs. He pulled out slowly, groaning as I whined needily, my hips straining. Panting, I lifted my heavy head and stared down at him as he peeled off the condom with a wince. My eyes widened when he immediately reached for another.

“I—You—” I swallowed, trying to catch my breath. “Didn’t you just come?”

His dick was still hard and straining as he rolled the fresh condom on with deft fingers. “Yeah.”

I cried out in bliss when he gripped my thighs and thrust back inside, a delirious smile spreading over my face as my head fell back on the bed. Moaning in time with every hard smack of his hips against me, I gripped the chains and tried to lift my hips into each thrust.

When he fisted my cock and started stroking fast, I choked on a breath.

“N-no,” I whined. “I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” His voice was hard, face tight with arousal and forehead damp with sweat. Some of his hair had slipped free of its bun, hanging over his eyes as he stared down at me. For a second they looked solid black, pupils shining eerily in the lamplight.

Then a brutal shard of pleasure was lashing up my shaft, and my head tipped back as I cried out.

“S-stop,” I begged, even as my hips bucked feverishly. “I’ll c-come.”

“You want me to stop?” He stroked me even faster, pounding hips speeding up to match.

For a brief moment I considered using my safeword, because I was seconds away from coming and I wanted to be good for him, but then Theo was releasing my cock anyway to lean over me on his hands, groaning through clenched teeth that flashed white in the blue of his beard.

“Fuck,” he bit out, brows pinching as anguished pleasure washed over his features. “Fuck. Fuck—”

His hips jerked as he came for a second time. I watched avidly, breathing hard, as his eyes slid shut and his lips parted on a trembling groan. When he opened them, they were heavy and sated, darker than ever. He dipped his head to kiss me, holding up his weight when I strained my hips and tried to rub against him. I was shaking, almost mindless with the urge to come. Surely he was done now. Surely he’d let me.

Sliding his cock free with a hiss, he stumbled back off the bed and reached down to take off the condom. I panted, hair sticking to my damp temple as I rolled my head to watch him, legs still spread as wide as possible and hips writhing. I felt empty, needing the hard length of him back inside me, the weight of him covering me.

“Th-Theo,” I pleaded, but instead of climbing back up to join me, he backed up to sit down in one of the two dainty armchairs arranged against the far wall, directly opposite the bed.

Letting out a sated sigh, he reached for the packet of cigarettes and the lighter resting on the small table between them, pulling one free.

I stared in disbelief as he lit it and relaxed, thick thighs spread and head tipping back to exhale a long stream of grey smoke into the air.

“Theo,” I said, my voice harder, yanking on the chains keeping me restrained. They rattled against the headboard.

He lifted his head and watched me as he sucked in another lazy drag, the tip flaring orange-red between his fingers. The sharp smell of cigarette smoke drifted over and stung my nostrils, but I was conditioned to associate that scent with him now. My hips strained again, and I struggled to lift my head to stare at him directly between the wide vee of my legs.

"P-please." I rolled my hips again to try and entice him. Theo's eyes flared, but all he did was bring the cigarette back to his lips.

I whimpered plaintively, legs sliding restlessly, my stockings rasping as they rubbed together.

"No." The hard crack of Theo's voice made my breath catch. "Keep your legs spread."

Thighs trembling, I obeyed. My cock flexed up off my stomach, a thread of pre-cum connecting it to the soaked patch of fabric on my garter belt.

I needed to come so badly I couldn't focus on anything else, which was exactly what I'd wanted, but right now it was horrible and amazing all at once. My hole clenched, and I didn't know if Theo saw, but he groaned low from the other side of the room.

I tried yanking fruitlessly on the chains again, my hands sweating around the warm metal. I was hot all over, but shivering. I felt raw, reduced to nothing but nerves.

When I lifted my head to look at Theo again, his cigarette was only half gone and he looked in no rush. Letting out a sobbing groan, my head fell back onto the bed as my hips rolled up. When the wet tip of my cock slid over the lace of the garter belt, I gasped, shuddering from the intense shock of pleasure.

My hips started moving feverishly, dragging the tip of my cock up and down over the wet fabric. I was so far gone, I knew I could come like this, with the tiniest hint of stimulation. I didn't care about waiting for Theo anymore. I didn't care about being good for him. I just needed to—

"Stop that," he barked, and my body obeyed instantly even as I trembled from the orgasm just out of reach. "Or do I have to tie your legs down?"

"Please," I sobbed, shaking my head weakly on the mattress. "I can't. I don't want to wait anymore."

"You can say your safeword, and I'll untie you," Theo said calmly. I heard him exhale another lungful of smoke.

But I didn't want to say it. I wanted him to make me come while I was pinned down, stretched out, helpless to do anything but let him play with my body.

When I stayed silent aside from my shuddering breaths, I heard him huff in amusement. "Good boy."

"Please," I begged again, even though it hadn't worked before. I couldn't think of any other words.

I heard the creak of leather and the quiet hiss of his cigarette being stubbed out in the ashtray. My vision was hazy when I looked down and saw him approaching the bed, stroking his hard cock. How the fuck was he still hard?

I moaned desperately when he rolled on another condom. He slid in easily, hard and fast, making a choked sound leave me. Then he was pounding his cock inside me again, and my eyes rolled back in my head. His hands cupped the backs of my knees, keeping my legs up in the air and spread wide. I felt him shudder against me, his cock surely hyper sensitive by now.

"You can come," he gritted out, never slowing his brutal pace.

Like his words had unlocked my orgasm, I felt it rushing up on me with overwhelming speed. My cock jumped off my stomach, and my back bowed when it hit. I could feel lines of heat hitting my bare skin and the lace of the bra. My vision whited out entirely for a few moments, all the noises in the room vanishing until I could hear nothing but static in my own head.

I didn't know if any sounds left me, or if the brutal intensity of it rendered me completely silent. As the pleasure slowly began to fade, I heard Theo grunt and felt his hips jerk in orgasm, fingers gripping the backs of my legs tighter.

I was shaking when my body sagged back onto the bed. My shoulders were on fire, arms numb and fingers stiff as I slowly uncurled them from around the chains. My hole felt swollen and sore in the best way as Theo carefully pulled out, and then the mattress dipped as he moved.

Warm fingers brushed my sensitive inner wrist at the headboard, making me shudder. My entire body felt raw, even the soft slide of lace over my nipples almost too much. Theo gently lowered my arm once the cuff was undone, pressing a kiss to my palm.

He rounded the bed to undo the other cuff, and I finally blinked my heavy eyes open to look at him. He gave me a tiny smile when our gazes locked.

"You okay, dimples?" He leaned down to kiss my sweat-damp hair once my other arm was free.

I nodded, still shaking wildly as I shifted over on the bed to make room for him. He didn't seem to care about the cum streaking my front as I curled into his warmth, his arms wrapping around me tight.

He held me close, sifting his fingers through my hair until I stopped shivering. Eventually, my mouth tipped up into a delirious smile as I rubbed my cheek in his chest hair.

"Can we do that again?" I murmured drowsily, sliding my palm over his stomach.

Theo chuckled, jostling my head. His hand slipped down to squeeze my sore shoulder, thumb applying pressure and massaging the tight muscles. "If I get to see you dressed like that again, I'll do whatever you want."

I smiled sleepily. "Thought you'd like it. Did you take a pill or something?"

He huffed in amusement, kissing the top of my head. "No."

I lifted my head to stare at him incredulously. "But you came like three times. In quick succession. You said before that *you* didn't think you'd be able to keep up with *me*."

He flashed me a wolfish grin and a shrug. "Guess I'm just really into the sight of you chained to my bed in your lingerie, dimples."

His words made me want to preen. I stretched up to kiss him, sliding one of my stockinged legs over his calf.

He cupped the back of my head as he broke the kiss. "Ready to get cleaned up, or do you need a few more minutes?"

"No, I'll do it now. I'm already falling asleep."

I slid out of bed on shaky legs, and Theo helped me peel off my lingerie before taking me into the bathroom to clean up. Once he'd got me back into bed, he went downstairs to get a glass of water and made me drink it all.

By the time he flicked off the light and wrapped himself around me from behind, I was already falling asleep, too sated to notice whether the ghost was in here watching us.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

I returned to work the following Tuesday, getting back into the swing of things quickly. Inaya wanted to hear all about my week off, even though I hadn't done much except lounge around Theo's house and pool and have lots of sex.

I met Edel for lunch, not fully grasping just how much I'd missed them until I saw them waving cheerfully at me from outside the café. They said it had been surprisingly great living with Amir, even though he shared a flat with his brother, who was notoriously messy, and Edel was very particular about keeping their living space clean and tidy.

They asked how it had been staying with Theo. I hadn't mentioned the ghost, instead choosing to focus on all the wonderful things that came with living with him. All the wonderful things about *him*. They said they'd never seen me so smitten and joked that I might not even want to move back into the flat once it had been renovated after the flood.

I'd flushed at that, giving a noncommittal shrug as I sipped my drink through a straw. I already knew I'd say yes if Theo asked me to move in with him. Maybe that was fast—it had only been a few months—but Edel was right. I'd never felt like this about anyone before. I'd had boyfriends. I'd been in love. But with Theo, it felt… more. Passionate and intense, but solid and meaningful at the same time. I didn't know if that was because he was older, or I was more mature now since my last proper relationship a couple of years ago, but I suspected those things didn't really matter. I was pretty sure it was just him.

Edel and I arranged to meet for lunch again later in the week before we both headed back to work. The afternoon passed quickly, and before I left

for the day I bought a big bunch of lilies to leave for Lisa when she came to work the next day. I already liked Lisa. She'd been warm and friendly, and she did an amazing job with the garden.

Theo was picking me up, so I texted him to let him know I was on my way to the spot where he usually waited for me as I walked down the road, cradling the paper-wrapped bunch of lilies in one arm. I tugged the strap of my bag higher on my shoulder as I skirted round a middle-aged couple coming out of a clothing store. The woman's eyes widened as they darted down my frame, taking in my short pink dress under my denim jacket.

"Ari."

I stopped at the sound of my name, turning to see an officer climbing out of a police car at the side of the road. A little bolt of fear gripped me, as if I had some reason to worry even though I knew I didn't. That same panic I got every time I went through customs at the airport to visit my mother, convinced they were going to find something in my bag when I *knew* there was nothing bad in there.

As the officer started walking towards me, I relaxed when I realised who it was. I was pretty sure his name was John, though I couldn't be certain, and he was married to Tessa who I used to work with at the bar. She'd served us when we'd gone there a short while back.

"Oh. Hi." I smiled at him. "How are you?"

"Fine." He stopped in front of me, tucking his thumbs under the arm holes of his uniform vest and watching me intently. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good thanks," I said hesitantly, wondering what he wanted.

He gave a clipped nod and rocked on his heels once, looking around us. "Tessa said she saw you at the bar recently."

"Um, yeah." I offered him another small smile. "It was nice to see her."

"With a, uh, Theo Colobert," he spoke over me, butchering Theo's surname with his British accent. He was watching me closely again. "You good friends with him?"

I tensed, fingers clutching the strap of my bag. The paper around the lilies crinkled as I gripped it a little tighter.

"Yes," I said, my voice more guarded. "He's my—We're seeing each other. Why?"

John frowned, glancing around us again before stepping closer. He lowered his voice. "Look, I shouldn't be telling you this, but Tessa told me I had to after she saw you with him. He's… You need to be careful."

“What?” I laughed in disbelief. “Of Theo?”

“Yes.” John’s expression was grim. He parted his lips to speak again, hesitating at first. “He was a… suspect in a missing person case a few years back. A business associate of his.”

Shock jolted through me, my stomach squeezing into a tight knot. “What?”

He gave a terse nod. “There was reason to believe Colobert could have been involved when the guy vanished.”

“I—” My brain was blanking out. I shook my head weakly. “Wh-why? What reason?”

“Can’t divulge too many details,” John said airily, but it looked like he was enjoying my utter shock, like he was gleefully giving me nothing more than meaningless gossip.

Defensive anger for Theo bubbled up. So he was happy to tell me Theo had been suspected of something like this, but not *why?* I was just supposed to believe him?

“How does Tessa even know about that?” I snapped, trying to calm down when John lifted a stern brow at my tone.

“I told her about it at the time. I was one of the officers on duty while they searched his house.” His voice was carefully light, but I could detect a defensive edge. “All the officers tell their partners about the interesting cases. Not like we get them all that often around here.” He chuckled. “Especially ones involving weirdos with fucking… blue beards and metal in their faces.”

My fists clenched at how cavalier he was being while accusing Theo of something so serious. John must have seen the anger on my face, because he let out another condescending chuckle.

“Come on, you have to admit he’s got to be… odd to choose to look like that.” His brow quirked, and his lip curled slightly when his gaze dropped to my dress and bare legs. “But then…”

Fuck you. I clenched my teeth, feeling my face get hot, which just made me even more furious. How dare this arsehole try and shame me? Shame Theo?

“So what you’re saying is”—my voice was tight with barely controlled anger—“he was suspected because he was an easy person to pin it on, but ultimately you came up with nothing. Seeing as he’s not in prison.”

John’s face hardened, turning cold. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“I don’t see any other way to look at it,” I shot back.

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and he took another step closer, clearly trying to intimidate me. I raised my chin and stared back, not letting him.

“I was just trying to do you favour,” he muttered, then stepped back with a careless shrug. “Keep dating him for all I care. But I can’t say I’ll be surprised when you go into that big fuckin’ house in the middle of nowhere and never come back out. I’m telling you, he’s shady.”

“He’s shady because he has a blue fucking beard?” I said incredulously, snapping my mouth shut when John’s eyes darkened threateningly.

“Watch your language when speaking to an officer.”

The hypocrisy made tight laughter bubble up my throat. I shot him a falsely saccharine smile, baring my teeth. “Thanks for your time, *officer*. Tell Tessa I said hello. I better go. Theo’s picking me up.”

John raised a brow but said nothing as I turned to walk away. But before I did, I whirled back and pointed a finger at him.

“Oh, and one more thing. I was nearly mugged a while ago, and I reported it, and the police did *fuck all.* The guy had a *knife*. So maybe you should be spending more time actually doing something fucking useful instead of skulking around town and gossiping about shit that didn’t even happen.”

I spun and stamped off, seething with anger, half expecting John to stride after me and stop me for speaking to an *officer* that way. I was still trembling with rage when I spotted Theo’s car waiting in the usual spot, climbing in and slamming the door behind me.

His pierced brow quirked as he looked over, watching while I stuffed my bag between my feet. He took the bunch of lilies from me, eyeing them with a strangely wary expression before stretching his arm out to lay them on the back seat.

“You okay, dimples?” he asked, waiting until I’d clipped in my seatbelt before pulling smoothly back onto the road, merging with traffic.

“I’m fine,” I said tersely.

Theo shifted his hand off the gear stick and onto my thigh, squeezing lightly. “You sure?”

I stared down at his long, tanned fingers, the old tattoos bleeding blue ink into the skin. I hated the hesitation I felt when I slowly curled my fingers around his, looking up at his profile while he drove, just a hint of unease creeping into my gut.

“I…” I licked my lips. “I just got stopped by a police officer.”

“What?” Theo glanced over sharply, worry bleeding into his eyes as he looked me over. “Why? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I… He’s married to someone I used to work with. She saw us at the bar the other week. He…” I hesitated. “He warned me about you.”

Theo was quiet for a long moment. Slowly, his hand shifted off my lap and onto the steering wheel.

“He warned you about me,” he echoed in an inflectionless voice, face blank.

Nerves made me jittery, and I shifted in my seat as I mumbled, “He said —something about a missing person case a while ago. Someone you knew.”

Theo exhaled, hand lifting from the steering wheel to rub his eyes. “Yeah. A big contractor I worked with a few times on some buildings that needed renovating.”

“Why—why did they suspect you?” I asked in a near-whisper, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

“His secretary gave the police his schedule for the weeks leading up to his disappearance.” He shrugged stiffly and glanced in the wing mirror before changing lanes. “His last appointment was with me.”

Some of the tightness in my gut eased. I quietly asked, “At—at your house?”

“No, at his office.”

“But he—” I licked my lips. “He said they searched your house.”

Theo sighed wearily. “Yeah, they searched my house. I let them in. I didn’t stop them from doing anything. I didn’t get in their way.”

“Oh,” I whispered, staring down at my fingers twisting anxiously in my lap.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Theo glance over at me. We were on the country roads now, not another car in sight. After a few seconds, he pulled into a layby next to a wheatfield and brought the car to a stop.

“Look, Ari…” Hands sliding off the steering wheel and into his lap, Theo looked over at me again. “I’m not going to ask you if you trust me, to try and manipulate you into believing me over him because we’re... I can only give you the facts.”

I finally looked up at him as he gave a helpless shrug, dark eyes holding mine.

“They questioned me. They searched my house and found nothing. They kept tabs on me for a while and”—he shrugged again—“still nothing.”

I nodded, pursing my lips and lowering my gaze.

Theo was a wall of tension beside me, but his voice was gentle when he said, “I don’t ever want you to feel unsafe with me, Ari. So if you—I can book you a hotel in town. Or take you to Edel and Amir’s, if you don’t want to come home with me. If you—If you want to call it a day.”

My breath caught. I could hear the pain in his voice. The thought of ending it with Theo made my heart clench up, my throat spasm. I shook my head and reached over to curl my fingers through his.

“No, I don’t want that,” I croaked, squeezing his hand. “I believe you. I trust you.”

I did, I realised with perfect clarity. I trusted Theo. Of course I did. I certainly trusted him far more than that arsehole police officer.

“That guy was a judgemental prick anyway,” I muttered, then let out a weak laugh. “I’m pretty sure they only suspected you because you have a blue beard.”

Theo didn’t smile as he watched me solemnly, but his thumb kept rubbing soothing circles over the side of my hand.

“Do you want me to book you a hotel for tonight anyway?” he asked quietly. “So you can think it over?”

I shook my head, smiling at him. “No. I don’t need to think anything over. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

By the time we got home, the lilies for Lisa had wilted considerably in the car. I hurriedly put them in water once I got to the kitchen, hoping they'd perk up again by the morning, but when I went downstairs the next morning to make some coffee while Theo was in the shower, I gasped in dismay as I walked into the kitchen. The lilies were scattered all over the floor, the vase smashed to pieces in a puddle of water.

Theo came into the kitchen while I was still sweeping up the shards of glass and mopping up all the water. His voice was guarded when he asked, "What happened?"

"I don't know, I found them on the floor when I came down." I sat back on my heels and sighed as I looked at the lilies still scattered all around me.

Strangely, they looked like they'd been cut weeks ago, the delicate white leaves brown and floppy. And some of them had been flattened, like something heavy had stamped on them. My gut cramped with unease.

"Is Athena okay?" I suddenly asked, glancing up at Theo worriedly as he stared at the dead flowers, a strange expression on his face. "What if she walked in the glass and cut herself?"

His mouth pulled into a frown, and he turned and headed out of the kitchen to find her. I leaned over to start gathering up the lilies, placing a hand on the tiles to steady myself, not seeing the thin shard of glass until I felt it slice into my palm.

"Shit." I lifted my hand quickly and peered down. Blood was already welling, sliding down the centre of my palm to drip from the side of my hand, fat crimson droplets splashing onto the white tiles.

The sight of blood usually didn't affect me, but I felt lightheaded as I stood up to grab the kitchen roll. Tearing off a sheet, I pressed it to the cut and winced when a sharp stab of pain flared in my tender palm.

"What happened?"

I looked up at the sound of Theo's voice. His face went shockingly pale as he saw the blood on the floor, eyes haunted as they darted to me.

He rushed forward, banging his hip on the corner of the island as he rounded it to get to me. He didn't seem to notice, even as I winced in sympathy. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I just cut myself on the glass. I'm fine." I smiled up at him in reassurance, because he looked almost petrified as he stared at the blood-soaked paper towel pressed to my palm. "Honestly, I'm fine. It's just…" I let out a nervous laugh, looking down at my hand. "Gosh, it's bleeding a lot."

"Ari," he croaked, sounding devastated. Warm hands grasped my hips, gently leading me over to the sink. "You need to run it under cold water."

"Actually, I think there's still some glass in there." I winced, glancing up at him as he stared at the paper towel, which was now almost completely crimson. "Do you—Would you mind… Does blood freak you out?"

He *looked* like he was freaking out, like he'd come into the kitchen to discover me with my whole hand chopped off, bleeding out on the floor.

He swallowed, and I wasn't sure I believed him when he shook his head and said, "No, blood doesn't freak me out. Let's… Let me have a look."

I pulled the sodden paper towel away, and he took it from me to drop it into the sink, where it landed with a wet slap. Brows lowering over his dark eyes, he cradled my hand gently and stared at the long cut in the centre of my palm.

I bit my lip when I realised it was much deeper than I'd thought. The glass shard was still embedded in my skin, and the sight of that made me go lightheaded again. Theo didn't seem to care that my blood was dripping onto his fingers, but he looked so worried for me when he glanced up that I leaned into him.

"Once it's out, we can stop the bleeding." I smiled at him. "It's just that big piece, I think."

"Are you ready for me to take it out?" He carefully pinched the shard of glass between two fingers, jostling it and making me hiss. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

“It’s okay.” I nodded. “Ready.”

His hand was steady as he swiftly pulled the glass out and dropped it in the sink. Gently clasping my wrist, he turned on the cold tap and held my hand under it.

“Does it feel like there’s any more in there?”

I shook my head, watching my blood swirl with the water and pour down the drain. My hand started to go numb from the cold, but I let Theo keep it under the stream even as my fingers curled inward slightly, stiffening up.

“Is Athena okay?” I asked. “There’s still glass on the floor. We shouldn’t let her in yet.”

“She’s fine. She’s outside.”

“Did you check her paws?” I asked worriedly. “And is lily pollen bad for dogs? I know it is for cats—”

“She’s fine, sweetheart.” Theo pressed a kiss to my hair. “*You’re* the one with a nasty cut.”

“Oh, I’ll be okay.” I nudged him with my elbow, shooting him a tiny grin. “I *did* tell you I could be clumsy when we first met.”

Theo didn’t smile, face still drawn as he watched the blood start to slow as it pumped out of the wound. Eventually, he turned off the tap and grabbed another paper towel, pressing it to my numb hand.

“Keep that there for a while. I’ll finished cleaning up and get some antiseptic.”

He led me to one of the chairs at the island and helped me into it before vanishing to grab the first aid kit. I wanted to smile at how much he was coddling me over a little cut. Although, it wasn’t all that little, and it was pretty deep.

After he’d cleaned it with antiseptic and covered it in a bandage, I flexed my fingers and winced at the dull throb of pain. “Working’s gonna be difficult today.”

“Are you sure you should go in?” Theo knelt beside the ruined lilies, quickly sweeping up the rest of the glass.

I laughed. “I can’t call in sick for a cut. I’ll be fine. But I should probably text Inaya and let her know I’m going to be a bit late.”

When I sent Inaya a message explaining briefly what had happened, she replied instantly telling me to take the day off. It felt a little silly to—the cut

was covered up now—but my hand *was* throbbing painfully, and I didn't want to risk it repeatedly pulling open as I worked.

After she had assured me she'd be fine on her own, I told Theo that I was going to stay at home and he gave me a relieved smile, though his eyes were still tight with worry. After he'd finished clearing up the glass and ruined flowers, I hopped down from my chair and walked over to him.

"You're acting like I'm mortally wounded," I teasingly said, rubbing my good hand soothingly over his stomach.

He shook his head, mouth still pulled down within his beard. "I don't like seeing you hurt."

I melted, leaning up to kiss him.

"I'm a big boy." I smiled at him. "I can handle a little cut."

Theo stared down at my bandaged hand a moment longer before he looked at me. His expression was still a little haunted, but then it turned vulnerable as his Adam's apple bobbed.

"I love you, Ari," he said quietly.

My breath hitched. It wasn't quite shock that pounded through me, but more like deep elation. Like the feeling that everything had just clicked into place. Like everything was exactly right.

"I love you too," I said, mouth tipping up into a shy smile.

He swallowed again, and when he lowered his head and pressed his lips to mine, the kiss was soft. Almost delicate. I wrapped my arms around his neck and rested my cheek on his shoulder when we parted, my eyes slipping shut as warm hands slid down my back.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

The wound took a few weeks to heal fully, becoming nothing more than a faded pink line cutting across the centre of my right palm.

We were in the heart of summer now, the days long, the sky an unbroken, brilliant blue before it melted into oranges and lavenders and reds as the evenings drew in.

The garden teemed with flowers, their mingled scents were almost overpowering. The low drone of bees and chirp of crickets were a constant soundtrack to the lazy days I spent lounging outside.

It was a Monday, one of my days off, so I was lying by the pool reading while Theo worked in his office. When I heard his voice drifting outside from the sitting room as he babytalked Athena, I smiled and tilted my head back to watch him step onto the patio.

Athena trotted down the steps onto the grass as he walked over to me and leaned down to give me a kiss.

"How's work?" I asked, setting down my book and stretching.

"As dull as ever." He sat down on the empty sun lounger next to me. "But I have to go away at the end of the week. There's a building development up north I'm interested in."

"Oh, okay." I sat up and twisted round to place my bare feet on the warm stone, trying not to acknowledge the sharp stab of fear I felt at the thought of being alone in the house at night. "How long?"

"Hopefully only one night, but maybe two." He smiled at me, leaning forward to rest his forearms on his spread thighs. "I thought you might want to invite Edel and Amir over for dinner or something, so you're not alone and bored."

The instant relief was like a cool balm, soothing my belly. I loved Theo's house, and I loved being here. Except for when the ghost showed up, and it was still making itself known often. I'd gotten better at ignoring it, but the thought of being all alone in this big house for an entire day and night—maybe two—was panic-inducing.

"That would be lovely." I grinned at Theo, standing up and crossing over to perch on his lap. "Would it be alright if they stayed over? If they want to."

"Of course, dimples." His big hand smoothed up my thigh. "Do you want me to get anything in advance? Or I could cook something for you to reheat when they're here."

I smiled and leaned into him. "You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind. What about drinks? Amir mostly drinks beer, right? There are some IPAs in the fridge."

I nodded and gave him a teasing grin as my fingers scrubbed through his beard. "And Edel likes wine, actually. Maybe you two can discuss the intricacies of a fine wine next time you see them."

His lips quirked into a wry smile. "I'll bring some bottles up before I go."

"Thank you." I kissed his cheek before sliding off his lap to retrieve my phone from the sun bed. "I'll text Edel now."

"Will you be alright looking after Athena?" He nodded over at the dog, who was rolling around in the grass like a big dope. "Don't walk her when it's dark."

I looked up from my phone to give him a teasing smile. "I won't, but it's not like there's ever anyone around here."

Theo frowned as he approached. "People walk their dogs in the woods sometimes. Just make sure you lock up when it gets dark."

I spluttered with laughter, firing off the text to Edel before giving his stomach a gentle shove. "You leave the doors unlocked all the time."

"Yeah, when I'm home." He smoothed back my hair and cupped my cheek, his eyes serious as he stared down at me. "Just promise me you'll remember."

I smiled, turning my head to kiss his palm. "I promise."

My phone vibrated in my hand with an incoming text, so I looked down to see that Edel had already replied.

Omg, sounds great, I can't wait to see his place!

“They’re up for it.” I grinned up at him, rising on my tiptoes to give him a kiss. “Thanks.”

I SHIVERED on the front door step that Friday morning as I watched Theo throw a small overnight bag into the boot of his car. The sun had barely risen, the sky a pale lavender and dew still dotting the grass around the edge of the driveway.

He slammed the boot shut and made his way over, shoes crunching on gravel. I smiled tiredly up at him when he reached me, and he rubbed his big hands down my arms as a frown pinched his brows.

“Go back to bed, dimples.” He kissed the top of my head. “You’re cold.”

“I’m up now. I’ll make some coffee and take Athena for a walk.”

She was standing alert in the front hall behind me, head cocked and eyes sad as if she understood her master was going away. She whined as Theo wrapped his arm around my shoulders and led me back inside, licking his hand when he stroked her muzzle.

“Feels wrong to leave you here without a car,” Theo said as we walked into the kitchen, and when I glanced over at him he was frowning again.

“Amir has a car, and they’ll be here for tonight at least.”

“What time are they getting here?”

“About seven, I think.” I slid out from under Theo’s arm to make my way around the island. “Do you want some coffee before you go?” I asked as I reached for the kettle.

“No, I need to head off in a minute.”

When I glanced over as I filled the kettle under the tap, Theo was rubbing his eyes tiredly. “How long will the drive take?”

“About seven hours. My meeting’s this afternoon.”

I gave him a sympathetic smile as I flicked on the kettle, then walked back over to slide my arms around his waist. “Hope it’s not too boring.”

“It will be,” he deadpanned before flashing me a tiny smile and dipping his head to kiss me. “I better go.”

I clung to his hand and followed him back into the hall. “Drive safe. I love you.”

“I love you too.” He gave me one last kiss. “I’ll text you when I get there.”

Athena was already whining in distress as he bent down to say goodbye to her, kissing the top of her head. “Be a good girl for Ari.”

“We’ll be fine here,” I said cheerfully, crouching in the doorway to wrap my arms around Athena’s neck, making sure she didn’t bolt after Theo as he got into the car.

After a final wave, he swung the car around and headed down the long driveway. I watched until he disappeared around the bend, trees shielding him from view.

Straightening up, I ushered a reluctant Athena inside and closed the door. She howled in the hall, a low, morose sound that made me crouch down and kiss the top of her head. She only stopped when I distracted her by asking if she wanted to go for a walk, and soon she was snuffling around in the grass as I traipsed over the misty fields behind the house.

When we got back, I made some coffee and carried it upstairs to take a shower and get dressed for work. Theo had pre-booked a taxi to take me there and bring me back later when I finished for the day, and I heard the crunch of tyres over gravel just as I was putting down Athena’s breakfast in the kitchen.

I felt bad leaving her alone for a whole day, but Theo assured me she’d be fine—he just warned me that she might be more hyper when I got home. After giving the top of her head a final kiss, I slipped out of the house while she was distracted by her food, locking the front door and giving the cab driver a smile as I turned and started heading over to the car.

“Morning,” he said cheerfully when I slid into the backseat. He nodded at the house. “Lovely place.”

“I—Thank you.” He didn’t need to know that it wasn’t mine, so I kept it brief.

The car smelled like pine air freshener and old coffee. I chatted politely to the cab driver as we made our way down deserted country roads until fields turned into neat rows of houses, then cramped, closely packed buildings as we reached the town.

“Not sure who’s picking you up later, but they’ll be here just after five,” the driver said as he pulled in just down the road from the florist shop.

“Perfect, thank you.” I gave him a tip even though Theo had already paid for the cab, then slid out and headed towards the shop.

I had just enough time to grab an iced latte from Holy Grind before starting work, and the day passed slowly, partly because I was a little tired from waking up so early to see Theo off.

By the time five rolled around, I was exhausted, but excited to see Edel and Amir later. The cab drive home was uneventful, and soon I was unlocking the front door to the house.

Athena barked madly, happy to see me after what must have been a boring day for her. Evening sun shone in through the windows in the sitting room, splashing over the tiles and filling the front hall with a hazy golden glow.

After taking her for a walk, I got changed and went into the kitchen to start getting dinner ready. Despite my insistence that he didn’t have to, Theo had cooked a huge batch of bouef bourgignon the night before, and it sat on the bottom shelf of the fridge in a cast iron pot. After heaving it out, all I had to do was turn on the oven and slide it in.

He’d brought up several bottles of wine from the cellar, white and rosé chilling in the fridge and the red lined up neatly on the island. We were going to eat on the patio, so I carried cutlery and napkins out there, then switched on the fairy lights Theo had strung up for me under the trellising.

When I headed back inside, I realised the house was peaceful in a way I hadn’t felt for a while. The air was light and balmy, and the silence didn’t put me on edge for once like it normally did, when I was constantly expecting to hear faint knocks or whispers.

Maybe the ghost was going to just let me enjoy my time with my friends tonight. Maybe it was going to give me a break while I didn’t have the comfort of Theo here.

Maybe… maybe it *wasn’t* bad. Maybe it wasn’t actually trying to scare me, but its very presence was simply terrifying without it meaning to be.

Either way, I didn’t let myself think about it for too long, part of me worried that if I did, I’d somehow summon it with my thoughts. Because maybe that was all it was. My thoughts. My own brain betraying me, inventing things that didn’t exist.

Maybe there was something wrong with me.

I was just putting down Athena’s dinner when I heard a car pull up on the drive. Hurrying to the front door, I grinned when I saw Edel climbing

out, dressed in long, flowy black trousers and an even longer, flowier white shirt with billowing sleeves.

"*Hallo*!" They chuckled when I raced to meet them, wincing as the gravel dug into my bare feet.

We'd seen them several times since the flood—Edel and I met up often for lunch, and we'd all gone out for dinner or drinks in town—but it still wasn't the same as seeing Edel every day, so I gave them a big hug when I reached them.

Amir rounded the car after locking it, carrying an overnight bag. He gave me a beaming smile and a kiss on the cheek after I released Edel, and then they both turned to stare up at the house with wide eyes.

"This place is huge!" Edel whispered, as though Theo might somehow overhear them despite being miles away.

I chuckled as they slung their arm over my shoulders and we started heading inside. "It is. It's beautiful. I thought we could eat outside, though. The garden is really nice and we never use the dining room."

"Sounds great."

Athena was wandering out of the kitchen as we came inside, licking her chops. Her ears perked up at the sight of new people, and then she was bounding over to say hello. After receiving a huge fuss from both of them, she wandered into the living room and lay down in front of her tennis ball to start gnawing at it—her post-dinner ritual.

I showed Edel and Amir into the kitchen, and Amir whistled as he set down the overnight bag by the door. "My mum would probably sacrifice me to the devil for this kitchen."

Edel nudged him affectionately. "Your mum would probably sacrifice you or any of your brothers to the devil for a single afternoon off from babysitting grandkids."

Amir frowned. "What about my sister? *She's* the one who gave her the grandkids."

Edel snorted, sliding into a seat at the island. "We all know your sister is your mother's favourite."

"I resent that," Amir muttered, then perked up as he grinned at me. "What's for dinner? Smells great."

I grinned as I grabbed two IPAs from the fridge and a wine glass for Edel. "Theo made us beef bourgignon before he left."

Edel shot me an impressed look as Amir asked, "Can *I* date Theo?"

“That Bluebeard’s a good man, *ja*?” Edel grinned, happiness for me dancing over their face. “He’s racked up so many points I’ve lost count.”

I smiled as I popped the lids off the two beer bottles, before sliding one across the island to Amir. “Yeah. He’s a good man.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

"That was the last of the red," Amir said as he upended the bottle over Edel's wine glass, only a thin stream trickling out.

"*Boooo*." Edel picked up their nearly empty glass and gestured sloppily with it. "You two should have stuck to beer so I had more to enjoy. This is the best wine I've ever had. Theo has good taste."

They had kicked off their shoes and propped up their feet on the empty seat opposite, their pale blue nail polish flashing under the fairy lights as they flexed their dark toes.

"I'm a refined man," Amir said obstinately, his mouth stained red. "You have to have fancy wine with French food."

He picked up one of Edel's feet and tickled them, making them squirm with laughter and almost fall out of their seat. I snorted, draining my own wineglass. I didn't usually like wine, but had decided to join them both when Amir said he'd switch over after draining his beer.

Edel was right. It was good, deep and smooth, far different to any of the cheap bottles I'd bought from supermarkets in the past, or the house reds in pubs and restaurants.

"There's some white in the fridge," I offered, hearing the slight unsteady slur in my voice. We were all a little drunk, and my cheeks hurt from how much I'd been smiling and laughing over the course of the evening.

Edel wrinkled their nose. "We can't switch to white now. We'll all throw up."

I bit my lip, glancing in through the windows to the front hall beyond the living room. I didn't want the evening to end yet. We were still sitting

outside, Athena snoozing at my feet. I flexed my toes absently in her thick fur.

The night was warm, and the scent of the honeysuckle over our heads permeated the air. The reflection of the fairy lights danced over the pool, making the still, dark water sparkle. An owl hooted from somewhere in the peaceful black mass of the garden beyond the patio, causing Athena's head to perk up.

I leaned down to scratch behind her ears. "I might be able to get us some more red," I said, standing up unsteadily.

Edel whooped as Amir drummed his fists on the table with a cheer, making me grin as I walked inside. A wave of affection washed over me as my bare feet padded across the cool tiles to the front hall. I loved them like they were my family. Even though they had gotten together quickly after meeting at university, I'd never felt like a third wheel with them.

I wished Theo was here to enjoy this evening with us. I felt sad for him, stuck in a depressing hotel room all alone. We'd only texted briefly earlier, because he didn't want to disturb my evening with my friends. He'd said he'd just got back to the hotel and was going to order some room service before going to bed.

I wondered where he kept the key to the wine cellar as I stepped into the front hall. I'd only been down there with him once before, when he'd been grabbing some wine to have with dinner and I wanted to take a look. It was dim and cool, with rough stone floors and a sharp, mineral-like smell in the air.

I could see why he kept it locked so Athena couldn't get down there. He'd nodded at a second door leading off from the wine cellar and said it led to a room he didn't use, because it was damp and mould grew on the walls no matter what he treated it with.

My head was spinning a little as I made my way over to the door, hoping he kept the key to the padlock nearby and in easy reach. I pouted when I couldn't see anything, my bleary eyes scanning the wall for a hook or key box.

Trying my luck, I gave the padlock a gentle tug just in case he hadn't locked it after bringing up the wine for tonight. It didn't budge, the body heavy and cold in my hand. Letting out a little sigh, I dropped my hand and turned, but a faint click had me spinning back round unsteadily.

My vision wavered for a second before it homed in on the padlock, which was now open. The weight of the body was causing the shackle to twist in the iron fixture, and I fumbled to catch it before it fell to the tiles. It was heavy enough to crack them.

The door creaked open as I set the weighty padlock on the floor. Straightening up, I reached my hand into the darkness and patted the wall until I found the light switch. A weak glow illuminated the stone steps, leading down to a second door at the bottom.

I glanced back to make sure Athena hadn't followed me before descending, running my palm along the cool stone wall to steady myself. The air got a little colder when I stepped into the wine cellar, the hum of the fridges muffled by the thick stone walls and floor.

I flicked on the light. Even though my vision was a little blurry from the wine, I noticed the pile of flowers in the centre of the room immediately.

Frowning in confusion, I walked forward and knelt beside them. Up close, I could see they were sweet briar roses, their apple scent filling my nose. Delicate, pale pink petals surrounded tiny, vibrant yellow stamens, and thick, hooked thorns trailed down the stems.

I rubbed a soft petal between my finger and thumb, a smile tipping up my mouth. Had Theo done this?

My gaze shifting to the side, I noticed a trail of rose petals leading away from the haphazard pile and vanishing under the thick wooden door to the unused part of the cellar.

I found myself standing up and walking over there. It wasn't locked, just closed with an old-fashioned iron latch that I lifted to tug the heavy door open. Impenetrable black greeted me, but when I looked down, the soft light coming from behind me revealed more rose petals leading into the darkness.

What is this, Theo? I thought with a tipsy smile. Had he been planning something for when he got back? Was I going to ruin the surprise if I followed the petals? Despite the thought, I fumbled to pull my phone out of my pocket and tapped on the torch, holding it up to peer deeper into the room.

The rose petals kept going.

Maybe if I'd been sober, I would've shut the door and waited for Theo to show me whatever he'd planned down here. I wouldn't have stepped

over the threshold into the darkness to start following the trail of rose petals on the floor, like a line of breadcrumbs that led a hungry animal to a snare.

I could hear water dripping somewhere in the darkness as I started walking, my eyes fixed on the rose petals in front of me, making my vision occasionally waver and double. Their sweet scent drifted up as I crushed them under my bare feet.

The air was cold, prickling at my arms, and it was only then that I realised I'd been walking for what felt like several minutes. How was that possible? There was no way the cellar was that big—that would mean it extended far beyond the perimeter of Theo's house.

Despite the unsettling thought, I didn't stop walking. I wasn't scared, I realised, even though the darkness was pressing in all around me, muffling my ears, only the halo of white light from my phone's torch breaking it.

I didn't notice at first when the air started heating up, not until it began to feel like I was in a steam room. The smell of stone baking and wood burning filled my nostrils, the sharp, stinging scent so strong I almost thought I could hear the crackling of fire.

The stone was hot under my feet now, the rose petals turning brown and curling up in front of my eyes. A rumble vibrated under my soles. Steady and rhythmic, soothing and unsettling at the same time as it throbbed in the pit of my stomach. At first, the low sound made me picture lava flowing. The earth shifting.

Until I realised it was more like calm, measured breaths. The deep inhale and exhale of something enormous, like I had just walked into the gaping maw of a huge beast that was about to snap its jaws shut and swallow me whole.

Murky brown light shone up ahead, weak and hazy. Just enough to pulse over the bottom of rough stone walls that were wet with condensation. Steam rose from the stone floor, swirling lazily.

Dread began to creep into the edges of my sluggish consciousness. My feet finally stopped, like I'd snapped out of a trance. My hand trembled as I lifted it higher, shining the torchlight deeper into the darkness.

Rose petals still made a path on the floor, a straight line directly in front of me. But they were black and shrivelled now, stinking faintly of rot.

They came to an abrupt stop a few yards ahead at what I first thought was a wall. But then I realised that murky brown light was being blocked

out by something else. It shone around the edges of two thick, distorted legs, covered in coarse dark fur, ending at a wide pair of cloven hooves.

Tiny white pupils flared in the dark.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

I blinked rapidly, my hazy brain struggling to catch up with what I was seeing. The light from my phone slid higher, over bowed thighs and a fur-covered torso that was thick with muscle.

When the light reached its face, all my limbs locked up, a fine tremor running through my body and making my breaths puff out in tiny panicked spurts.

Thick horns jutted up from its monstrous head, wide and sharp like a bull's. Its flat, squashed face was horrifyingly familiar, and before I could stop it I was remembering the feel of hot breaths chuffing against my throat and the slide of fur against my skin sending sharp, confusing arousal through my body.

Steam wafted from its nostrils, curling round the thick ring piercing its upturned septum. Solid black eyes seemed to glow under its heavy brow, its pinprick white pupils focused unwaveringly on my face.

Then it smiled, revealing an inhumanly wide mouth crammed full of needle-thin, razor-sharp teeth.

"*Ari*." Its deep, grating voice slunk through my head, even though it was still giving me that wide, manic smile. Its lips didn't move. "Sweet bloom. I want to siphon all that sweetness from your fragile little body and fill you with something stronger."

It started gliding forwards, hooves rasping together over the stone floor without taking a step.

"Darker," it rasped in my head, getting closer. "Let me fill you."

My muscles finally unlocked, and I stumbled back just as it lifted a claw-tipped hand to reach for me. I was too horrified to scream, my gaze

locked on that grinning mouth and those unblinking eyes. I finally turned to run, almost dropping my phone when I slipped on scattered petals.

I couldn't breathe as I sprinted through the dark, the light from my phone swinging wildly over hot, wet stone. I could feel it behind me, closing in on me, the horrifying sound of its unmoving hooves dragging over the ground, faster and faster.

I burst into the wine cellar seconds later, even though it had felt like I'd walked through the darkness for a long time. My hands were shaking so much I struggled to grab the door and heave it shut. White pupils flared in the blackness, a dark figure rushing up on me horrifyingly fast, before I slammed it and fumbled frantically with the latch.

I tripped on the stairs leading up to the front hall, skinning both my knees under the thin fabric of my trousers. Crawling the last few steps, unwilling to stop, I grabbed the padlock the moment I reached the cool tiles and shouldered the door shut, my fingers trembling wildly as I pushed on the shackle until it clicked.

Throwing myself away from the door, I crabwalked back until my head bumped into the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. My chest heaved with panicked breaths, heart thudding like pounding hoof beats. I was drenched in sweat, my clothes cold and sticky with it, the plastic case on my phone slippery under the tight grip of my fingers.

The front hall was jarringly bright and silent. I could faintly hear Edel and Amir laughing and talking on the back porch. Athena padded out of the kitchen, her tail wagging softly at the sight of me. She didn't even seem to notice that I was curled up in a petrified huddle on the floor, feeling like I was mere moments away from a heart attack.

When she ambled over and licked the sweat from my neck, I dropped my phone and clutched at her thick fur, my wide eyes still locked on the wine cellar door. No thick black smoke seeped through the crack. There were no three sharp raps from the other side. Nothing whispered my name through the door, taunting me, crooning horrifying, seductive words.

I rose onto trembling legs, my shirt sticking to my damp chest. The air drifting in from outside felt colder now, making me shiver as the sweat cooled on my body. I found myself walking slowly towards the sitting room, the soles of my bare feet tender on the tiles. I stared unseeing ahead of me, my eyes fixed on nothing.

“Did you get lost in there?” Edel laughed as I stepped out onto the patio. Then they let out a long sigh as their head dropped back. “Honestly, Ari, this place is like paradise.”

I almost let out a hysterical laugh, but I knew if I started, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

“I was looking for the key to the wine cellar,” I heard myself say vacantly. “I couldn’t find it.”

“*Ach*, oh well.” Edel sat up. “We should probably go to bed anyway. You have work in the morning.”

“What about the thing?” Amir muttered, nudging them.

My eyes snapped to them. I took a stilted step forward. “What thing? Did you see something?”

They both blinked at me, bleary-eyed.

“See something? No.” Edel shook their head, then gave Amir a nervous look as they reached out and curled their fingers over his. “There was something we wanted to tell you.”

I walked over to my seat and thudded down into it too hard. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything, but they were both too tipsy to notice anything was wrong.

Edel blew out a breath. “The landlord said the flat won’t be ready for a while, and our lease is coming to an end soon. So we… Amir and I decided it was finally time for us to live together.”

I stared at them blankly. They were both silent, waiting for my reaction, so I forced my lips to stretch into a smile and said, “That’s amazing. Congratulations.”

Amir chuckled, bumping his shoulder drunkenly against Edel’s. “My brother’s finally moving in with his girlfriend, so we’ll have the place to ourselves.”

“It’s about time,” I heard myself say with another forced smile, my mouth aching.

“So… you don’t mind?” Edel was watching me anxiously, chewing on their thumbnail. “You’ll have to… If you’re not going to stay here, you’ll have to find somewhere else. Or a new flatmate.”

“Of course I don’t mind.” I reached over and gripped their arm. “I’m happy for you both.”

They both relaxed, grinning at each other, their faces full of love and the excitement of embarking on a new phase of their relationship together.

“And let’s be real, you’re going to marry Theo and live in this big house in total bliss.” Edel covered my hand with theirs and squeezed as they gave me a teasing smile.

My smile wobbled, and for a split second I almost burst into tears. Edel didn’t notice, already leaning over to give Amir a kiss.

I couldn’t tell them. How could I tell them? They’d think I was insane. They might even think that Theo was mistreating me, and I was coming up with wild scenarios as an excuse to get away or to cope with it.

My eyes burned as I looked down for my phone before I realised I’d left it by the stairs. I wanted Theo. I wanted to hear his deep, soothing voice, telling me everything was going to be okay, telling me he loved me, telling me he’d look after me.

But Theo wasn’t here. Only that thing in the cellar was.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

The fact that I was numb with shock was probably the only reason I managed to bring myself to go back inside the house.

After locking up, I grabbed Amir and Edel's bags, which they hurriedly took off me, before leading them upstairs. I didn't look at the wine cellar door. I couldn't. On his way up, Amir bent down to grab my discarded phone from the floor, its torch still on, and passed it to me with an easy smile.

Earlier, I'd made up the guest room at the end of the hall so they'd have some privacy. Now I was regretting it. I didn't want to be all alone down the other end of the hall. Close to the stairs. Close to that door.

They both *oohed* and *aahed* over the guest bathroom I pointed out before opening their bedroom door. "Here you go." My voice was still flat and vacant.

"*Ach,* this is *nice*." Edel set their bag on the bed and turned to face me with a bleary smile. "Thank you—both of you—for letting us stay."

My mouth tipped up into a bland smile. "Of course. I'm happy you're here."

So I wouldn't be alone.

"Anything we should know?" Amir said with a chuckle as he drew the thick cream curtains over the window, blocking out the night. His words made me stiffen.

"Does the house creak?" he continued with an easy smile as he walked unsteadily to the bed, still a bit drunk. "Are we gonna wake up to foxes screaming in the garden?"

You might hear the thing walking around downstairs.

You might hear it whispering and mumbling in long, terrifying strings of unbroken sentences, like chanting. Or praying.

You might see it standing in your doorway, watching you while you both sleep.

You might hear it breathing in your room. Next to your ear.

But no one else ever did. It had only ever been me. Abruptly, my eyes got hot, so I forced on a fake smile and said, "Nope. It's always really quiet at night."

"We'll get a night of peace without having to listen to your brother playing games in his room until four in the morning," Edel said to Amir with a grin, before walking over and giving me a hug. "You look tired, *Engel.* Go to bed. You've got work in the morning."

My fingers clung to their shirt with embarrassing intensity. Their braids tickled my face, their familiar scent filling my nose, and my chin started trembling. The comfort of Edel's embrace made all the terror start rushing back.

Please help me, I wanted to beg. *Please don't make me face it on my own. I'm scared. I'm so scared.*

But what could they do? What could *anyone* do?

Stepping back, I turned to the door and gave them a wave over my shoulder, hoping they didn't notice how badly my voice wobbled as I said, "Night."

Closing the door behind me, I stopped and stared down the long empty hallway. My feet wouldn't unstick from the floor, and I stayed frozen in place until the sounds of Edel and Amir getting ready for bed in the room behind made me take a stilted step forward. Then another.

I'd already let Athena out one final time and locked up, not wanting to have to go back downstairs alone. I could hear a sound coming from our bedroom. Like the frantic rasp of something shifting over fabric. My vision went spotty, and a tear dripped down my cheek as I walked, jarringly and slowly, towards the open door.

I reached around and felt over the wall for the light switch so I wouldn't have to look into the dark bedroom. When bright light filled the room, I heard a familiar snort—a sweet, comforting one.

Peering round the doorframe, my body sagged in relief when I saw Athena rolling around on her back on the bed like a big dope. She wasn't really supposed to get on the bed, but I didn't shoo her off. The moment I

sat down beside her, she twisted round excitedly and leaned up to lick my face, inadvertently licking away the stripe of wetness on my cheek.

"You can sleep up here with me tonight," I told her, my voice wobbling again as my eyes prickled with heat.

Sniffing, I reached over and turned on the bedside lamp before standing up to turn off the main light and close the bedroom door. I slowly undressed for bed with hands that shook. I couldn't even bring myself to cross the hall and brush my teeth or wash my face. I climbed into bed, the sheets cool, and shifted over until Athena's back was pressed against my leg through the covers as she stretched out beside me with a yawn.

When I looked at my phone, I bit my lip hard as I saw that Theo had texted me over an hour ago saying he was going to sleep and that he loved me. I couldn't call him now and wake him up. He had another meeting early in the morning.

And besides, what would I say? *You have a demonic bull creature living in your cellar, and I think it tried to get me by luring me with flowers, and I've been hearing it and seeing it for months in your house and I think I'm losing my mind but please don't leave me please*

Shuddering with a suppressed sob, I set down my phone and picked up my book from the nightstand. My eyes burned with exhaustion, and my vision kept blurring as I started reading, but I couldn't sleep. I couldn't turn off the lights. If I turned off the lights, I'd see it. It would come into the room. It would pace at the foot of the bed and say my name and breathe its chuffing breaths in my ear.

It would get me.

I JERKED AWAKE SUDDENLY, disoriented by the soft light filling the room. The lamp was still on, and I was still half sitting up against the headboard, my book in my lap.

My head was pounding from wine and dehydration, mouth dry and tasting like death. When a soft scratching sound came from over by the door, my heart spasmed with terror and I jerked upright in bed. I only

relaxed infinitesimally when I saw Athena scratching at the door. She looked back at me and whined softly.

I knew that meant she wanted to go out and pee, but I couldn't bring myself to move as I stared at her. I didn't want to go out there. I didn't want to go down the stairs and past that door.

When she whined again and let out a low bark, I slowly pulled my legs out from under the covers and set my feet on the floor. She'd start barking soon, and I didn't want her to wake up Edel and Amir.

She shot out of the room the moment I pulled open the door with a trembling hand, her claws scrabbling over the floorboards before she clomped down the stairs. I'd left the hallway light on, but Edel or Amir must have turned it off after using the bathroom. The big window at the top of the stairs splashed moonlight over the wall and floor to my left, giving me enough to see by as I crept towards the staircase. I didn't want to turn the light on in case it shone under Edel and Amir's bedroom door and woke them up.

The house was utterly silent. I couldn't even hear Athena. The soles of my feet felt even more tender now, like the hot stone floor in the cellar had burned them. I kept my head down, the tremors racing through me getting stronger and stronger as I descended the staircase and the shadowy outline of the cellar door appeared to my left. The moment I reached the front hall, I flicked on the overhead light, wincing at its brightness.

Athena wasn't waiting by the backdoor in the sitting room, which meant she was in the kitchen. I speed-walked there, turning on all the kitchen lights the moment I stepped inside to reveal her waiting impatiently by the side door that led to Theo's herb garden.

She raced off after I let her out, snuffling around before vanishing into the darkness. As I waited for her, I filled a glass with water and grabbed two ibuprofen, swallowing them quickly and draining my glass as I stood by the island. My stomach was shaky with a hangover, and my hands were trembling finely. The water tasted awful in my unwashed mouth, but I forced myself to drink all of it.

By the time Athena came back in, pausing in the open doorway to stretch, I was wide awake and knew I wouldn't be able to even attempt to go back to sleep with this throbbing behind my eyes. After locking the back door, I couldn't bring myself to turn off any of the lights as I followed Athena out of the kitchen and into the front hall. She padded into the sitting

room, and I contemplated following her as my eyes darted back to the staircase—to that door.

Maybe I could watch TV for a while until I felt better. But the sofa faced the television on the wall, and I didn't want my back to the rest of the room, even with all the lights on.

But I didn't want to stand out here either, where black smoke could creep under the cellar door towards me. Where that thing could appear. And I didn't want to go and sit in the lonely silence of the bedroom, where it had appeared so often. Sit there waiting for it to show up.

Making a decision, I crossed the front hall to the library, but stopped on the way to use the downstairs bathroom. My pale, exhausted face stared back at me as I washed my hands, shadows marring the skin under my eyes, my lips white and pinched with lingering fear, my forehead wrinkled as the headache pounded in my temples.

Slipping into the library, I grabbed a random book from a shelf and opened the door to the winter garden. The warm, vegetal scent hit my nostrils, unclenching my shoulders just a little. I always felt calmer in here. Safer.

The overhead lights reflected the room when I turned them on, blocking out some of the darkness outside. But outside wasn't what scared me. Being in this house was scaring me. Being here without Theo was scaring me.

That thing was what scared me, and it was in this house with me. Not outside.

Theo had brought a blanket in for me at some point, and I wrapped myself in it as I sat down on the wide cushioned seat between the birds of paradise plants. There was a sound system in here to play music through speakers mounted on the two end walls, but I'd left my phone upstairs. Knowing that reading would make my headache worse, I opened the book regardless. I couldn't just sit here in silence doing nothing. I'd go mad.

It was always so quiet in here, the thick glass muffling any exterior noises. My headache slowly started to fade as the ibuprofen kicked in, despite the strain on my eyes, and my body gradually unclenched. The book I'd picked up was a cookery book from the sixties, filled with retro photographs of food that looked, quite frankly, disgusting, but it successfully distracted me from what had happened.

From what I'd seen down in the cellar.

Until a faint noise came from somewhere in the house. I stiffened instantly, staring down at a recipe for pineapple upside down cake. My ears strained so hard that I thought I could hear a faint ringing.

Then it came again. And again.

Footsteps.

It was out there.

I curled up into a ball under the blanket, staring wide-eyed at the closed door opposite. It was walking around out there, somewhere in the house, even though I had seen it glide across the floor with that horrifyingly inhuman movement.

But it wasn't gliding now. In fact, it sounded like it was stomping. Slamming its cloven hooves onto the floor.

I jumped violently when a heavy thud sounded from somewhere in the house. Then the hoof steps were back, getting louder. Getting faster and faster. My vision greyed out, all the blood draining from my face. My heart was pounding so hard I thought I was going to pass out. I couldn't take in enough oxygen, my chest hitching with tiny trembling breaths.

Something rushed down the stairs, impossibly fast. Oh god, it was down here. The clomp of hooves began to echo as it crossed over the tiles in the hallway. The sound got fainter as it moved away from this end of the house.

Oh my god, was it *looking* for me?

It was. It was. It was running around the house trying to find me. I couldn't breathe. I could *feel* its anger in the air.

The frantic, manic pace of hooves got louder. And louder. The sound became hollow and deeper as it reached the library and started racing across the floorboards. I pressed the blanket to my mouth and bit down hard to suppress my sob of terror, eyes glued to the door.

It was going to come in here next. It was going to get me.

What does it want what's it going to do to me oh god I want Theo why isn't he here why did he leave me with this thing—

All sounds ceased in an instant. My ears were ringing in the sudden silence, white spots dancing in my vision, my fingers curled so hard into the blanket I thought they were going to snap.

I didn't move an inch. I couldn't. I was frozen, so petrified I couldn't react at all.

When a light scratching came from the other side of the door, I almost pissed myself in terror.

Scratch scratch scratch. Stop. *Scratch scratch scratch.*

It fell silent again. Then—

Scratch scratch scratch, followed by a low mournful whine.

Slowly, I unclenched my teeth from around the blanket. It was… it was Athena.

I stared at the door as she scratched and whined again, clearly wanting to come in. Maybe… maybe it had just been her running around the house—not that the scrabble of her claws sounded anything like the heavy, manic pounding of hooves. But my mind latched on to the reasonable answer and refused to let go, lessening the terror locking me in place enough that I slowly uncurled from under the blanket and placed my feet on the floor.

I couldn't just leave her out there when she wanted to come in. She'd start barking eventually and wake Edel and Amir up.

And if… if that thing *was* out there somewhere, I couldn't leave her out there with it either. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to her—and I was pretty sure Theo wouldn't forgive me either.

Another sorrowful whine as I stood up and walked towards the door, my bare feet silent on the cool tiles, my legs aching from the weak tremors making them unsteady.

I was a few feet from the door when she whined again, but this time, it made me stop dead.

It… it sounded like Athena, but at the same time… it didn't. Her familiar pitiful whine was there, but it was… layered. There were deeper sounds under it. Low, discordant, rumbling like the earth moving.

I jerked back when she—it—scratched at the door again. Another whine, this one horrifyingly distorted. I covered my hands with my mouth to try and muffle the terrified whimper that left me.

It heard me. The scratching grew frantic in a rush, continuous, two sets of claws dragging over the wooden door in a frenzy. It shook in its frame from the onslaught, making me stumble back and fall onto my backside, my silky pyjama bottoms skidding over the tiles.

It didn't whine this time. It growled. A throbbing, furious sound that I felt in the pit of my stomach.

"Ari," it murmured through the door, and I might have blacked out for just a second.

Now that I had seen its face, I could *hear* that wide, manic smile in its voice. Its sharp teeth gleaming, eyes unblinking and white pupils never

wavering from my face as it had stared at me in the cellar.

The growl stopped and became a whine again, almost pitiful if it hadn't been so threatening and distorted.

"Let me have you, Ari," it whispered through the door. "We can share. Don't hide from me. Embrace me as he did. I'll have you both."

I couldn't take in its words, harsh pants ripping from my throat as I shoved myself back on the tiles, away from the door. I knocked into a big ceramic pot, tipping over the tall corn plant within and flinching when the pot shattered, dirt spilling everywhere. It squashed between my fingers as I kept trying to get away, away from the light tapping now coming from the door, three taps then a pause, over and over, never stopping.

Please stop please stop please stop

"Ari." My pounding heart spasmed at the hard crack of its voice, that wheedling tone gone. "Let me have you. *Let me fill you*."

"N-no," I managed to say on a weak sob, still retreating, not stopping until the back of my head bumped into the wall at the other end of the long room.

I could still hear it clearly, because it started shouting—a raw, cacophonous blend of layered voices that made my blood run cold.

"Ari. Ari. *Ari. ARI.*" It was pounding on the door now, smashing its fists into the wood so hard I thought the whole door was going to fly into the room and I'd see it standing there, a monstrous thing filling the frame, horns and claws and hooves and sharp teeth.

"LET ME HAVE YOU. YOU'RE MINE. MINE. MINE. MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE—"

"Stop," I sobbed, covering my face with my hands to try and block it all out. "Stop. Please. Please just stop."

And then it did.

I didn't lift my face from my hands. I didn't want to look up and see if black smoke was creeping under the door, coming into the room. I knew I'd lose my mind completely if I did.

I wept, curled up into a tiny ball on the cold floor.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

When the sun started to rise and the house had been silent for hours, I finally stood up on limbs that were stiff and trembling at the same time.

I felt like a zombie as I crossed the winter garden room and opened the door, too exhausted and numb to feel anything anymore. My eyes dropped to the door panel. There weren't any scratches on it at all. Not a single one.

The house was still and silent in a way that should have felt peaceful in the early hour, but it didn't. I crossed the front hall to the kitchen and washed my shaking hands in the sink to get the dirt off. Athena padded into the room, pausing to stretch, her tail wagging softly at the sight of me.

I stared at her. She ambled over and looked up at me with soft eyes, stretching her neck to lick my wet hand as it hung limply by my side. When she gave a little whine, the tight knot in my stomach eased. She sounded nothing like the thing that had been scratching at the door in the night. It had been a poor imitation, but that didn't make it any less horrifying.

Dropping to my knees, I wrapped my arms around her neck and buried my face in her fur. "I'm glad you're okay," I whispered, hating the thought of her being out here with that thing while it had raced around the house looking for me.

Guilt cramped my gut, so I pulled back to kiss the top of her head. "Hopefully Theo will be home tonight. He'll keep us both safe."

Because even though I'd been seeing the thing for months while Theo was here, it had gotten worse while he'd been gone. So, so much worse. It

was like the thing felt more confident now that I didn't have Theo to soothe me in the night, to help me feel safe just with his presence.

It was like it had just been waiting until it could get me alone.

Standing up, I went into the laundry room and grabbed some clean socks from the dryer. After tugging them over my cold feet, I pulled out one of Theo's sweatshirts and shrugged it on over my pyjamas. It wasn't as comforting as it could have been, smelling only like fabric softener with none of his warm fiery scent, but it was enough.

I went into the hall and put on my boots and coat, then walked back into the kitchen to unlock the side door while Athena lapped up water from her bowl. Her head perked up at the sound of the door opening, but I didn't ask her if she wanted to go for a walk, knowing she'd start barking madly at the word. I waited until she padded over and slipped outside, closing the door behind me.

It wasn't warm yet, but the sky was a clear, pale lavender as the sun slowly rose. The cuffs of my pyjamas became instantly soaked by the dew on the grass. As I watched Athena bound over the grass before squatting to pee, I took a deep, shuddery breath. Then another. It felt like I could breathe for the first time in hours, and I tilted my face up as I closed my eyes, sucking in long breaths through my mouth to taste the cold air.

We walked for a long time. Mist still swirled low to the grass before the sun rose higher and it dissipated. I was so exhausted I could barely keep my eyes open as I stumbled over dirt clods, but I kept going. I was tired and hungry and still a bit hungover, but I felt better than I had for hours. For what felt like days. Months.

The air was warming up as the house came into view up ahead after I eventually turned around to start heading back, whistling for Athena to follow.

I stared up at it blearily as we approached. How could something so beautiful—so idyllic—contain such an awful monster? How could Theo not have noticed that I'd brought something so terrible into his perfect house? His perfect life?

Guilt flooded me. What if I'd brought that thing here and it had attached itself to the house? What if it stayed here, even if I left, and haunted Theo instead, terrorising him for the rest of his life, lurking in his cellar until it crept upstairs to roam through the rooms like a spectre?

Unless, of course, it was all in my head. Maybe *I* was the monster in Theo's house. Maybe *I* would be what terrorised him, slowly losing my mind, seeing things that weren't there, hearing voices in the dark.

Having awful, arousing fantasies about a monstrous creature that wanted to *fill* me. With darkness, it had said in the cellar. The idea of my own mind conjuring that was horrifying. It felt like a betrayal.

It was still early when we got back. Edel and Amir weren't up yet. It was surreal to think of everything that had happened while they'd been here. And they hadn't heard any of it. Surely they hadn't. Surely at least one of them would have come running if they'd heard something tearing through the house and hammering on the door and screaming my name.

Had it even really happened?

As Athena padded over to her water bowl, I took off my boots and left them by the back door. The sodden hem of my pyjama bottoms immediately began to seep cold dampness through my socks. Still feeling numb, moving by rote, I started washing up all the dishes from the evening before.

Birds chirped in the garden. Shafts of sunlight streamed in through the windows and slowly made their way across the tiled floor until warmth bathed my cold feet. I curled my toes in my damp socks, trying to savour the peaceful moment. Peaceful on the surface, at least.

Once the last bowl was draining on the sideboard, I fed Athena and started making coffee. Leaving it to brew, I left the kitchen to go upstairs and take a shower. Even though I still felt strangely hollow, my breathing started speeding up as the cellar door came into view, instinctive fear making my chest squeeze tight. I forced myself to walk slowly up the stairs. The bedroom lamp was still on, and my phone was half buried in the rumpled covers.

Picking it up, I saw that Theo had texted me just a few minutes ago.

Morning, dimples. Just eating my terrible hotel breakfast. How was your evening? Did you sleep okay?

I gripped the phone too tight, staring down at it. Something slid against my palm, velvety soft. Turning the phone over in my hand, I stared at the pink petal stuck to the case.

Memories rushed into my brain, one after the other, fast and unstoppable like a forest fire devouring everything in its path. The flowers in the wine cellar. The trail of petals. The dank, dark walls and the heat and

the thing standing in front of me, grinning at me, gliding over the ground to get me, chasing me through the dark—

I forced them all back as I started to hyperventilate, my hand shaking around the phone. I struggled to grip the delicate edge of the petal, my fingers trembling too much, but even once I had, it wouldn't come off. Like it had been superglued on, or melted into the plastic.

My vision wavering, I flipped the phone back over and hurriedly typed a text back to Theo, my fingers pressing too hard into the screen.

Are you coming home tonight?

He took a couple of minutes to reply, but I didn't move an inch, staring down at the screen with burning eyes until the phone vibrated in my hand.

I'm going to try, but it'll be late if I do. Are you okay?

I didn't know how to reply to that. I wasn't okay. I was anything but okay. My chin trembled, so I pressed my lips together hard. What could I say? Beg him to come home when he was away on a business trip because I thought I saw something? Because I thought something was hammering on the door last night screaming at me, scratching frantically, but there were absolutely no marks there this morning?

I typed, *I'm fine.*

Theo's reply was much faster this time. *Are you sure?*

Yes, I typed back. *Just tired. I didn't sleep well without you.*

I'd hardly slept at all.

Theo replied almost instantly. *I'll be home soon. I miss you. Is Athena behaving herself for you?*

I couldn't bring myself to say more than, *We're both fine.*

But then I texted again. *I miss you too*.

It felt like he'd been gone for weeks. Like he was never going to come back, and I'd be stuck in this house alone forever, being stalked by a monster.

Before Theo could reply, I typed out, *Have to start getting ready for work. Hopefully see you tonight. I love you.*

I love you too, he said. *I'll try not to wake you up if I get in before the morning.*

I rounded the bed to put my phone on charge. After plugging it in, I fruitlessly tried to pick the petal off the case again, but it was still stuck. Out of everything, it was the least of my concerns. Turning round wearily, my eyes fell on my open suitcase.

Edel and Amir weren't staying again tonight—not that them being here had actually helped. It hadn't helped me feel safer at all. Everything had gotten even worse. Not that I was blaming them for that.

I could stay at a hotel tonight. I didn't want to be here alone. I didn't think I'd be able to handle it.

But I couldn't just leave Athena. And I couldn't bear the thought of Theo getting home early, in the middle of the night, expecting me to be here and instead walking into an empty house. An empty bedroom.

I was on the verge of tears again, so I quickly crossed the hall to start getting ready for work. At least I'd be out of the house for most of the day.

By the time I had brushed my teeth and showered, I could hear Edel and Amir talking in their room. Edel's laugh rang through the door, muffled, but the familiar sound didn't bring me any comfort.

I felt only marginally more human as I got dressed, but I looked like complete shit when I peered in the mirror. My skin was almost grey, huge bags under my eyes, my lips cracked and dry. The headache had returned, and a little wrinkle seemed to have taken up permanent residence between my brows.

I managed to get back downstairs before Edel or Amir had emerged from their room. I was dreading having to talk to anyone, having to seem normal. Athena was gnawing on her tennis ball when I walked back into the kitchen, the rich scent of freshly brewed coffee filling the air. Pouring myself a cup, I leaned on the island and sipped it. I was still shaky and weak, my head pounding and foggy.

"Morning!"

Edel's cheerful voice made me jump out of my skin as they walked into the kitchen, Amir following just behind. They both looked well-rested and fresh-faced, making me rub my tired eyes self-consciously.

As Amir made a beeline for Athena, who started wagging her tail happily, Edel stopped at the sight of me.

"Ari, you look awful." They approached the island, brows furrowing with worry. "Were you sick in the night? I know you don't normally drink wine."

"I—" The thread I was hanging on by was gossamer thin, and I couldn't let it snap. I just couldn't. "No, just didn't sleep well. Really hungover."

Edel relaxed, sliding into a seat with a chuckle. "Red wine is a killer."

I didn't want to talk, which made me feel guilty. I'd invited them here. Turning to the cabinets, I got out two cups and poured them both some coffee.

"Why don't you call in sick today if you're feeling rough?" Edel said as they sipped their coffee.

"No," I barked immediately, then cringed and exhaled a low breath. "No," I repeated calmly. "I want to go to work. I had a sick day not that long ago when I cut my hand. I can't keep calling in sick."

Edel frowned as Amir wandered over to pick up his coffee cup. "You cut your hand?"

"Yeah. While I was cleaning up a broken vase," I said dully, holding out my palm so they could see the faint scar. They both peered down at it.

"Looks kind of like stigmata," Amir commented, then shot me a teasing grin. "Are you the white Jesus, Ari?"

I couldn't bring myself to even smile. I saw Edel and Amir exchange a look, and then Edel was stretching out a hand across the island to reach for me.

"*Engel,* are you sure you don't want to just call in—"

"No," I snapped again, thudding down my coffee cup too hard. My head pounded. Crossing over to the door, I started tugging on my boots. "I want to go to work."

I wanted to get out of this house. I wanted to feel normal, for just a little while. I wanted to stay out for as long as possible so Theo would already be back before I got home.

Edel and Amir were both silent as I laced up my boots with trembling fingers. I could feel them watching me.

"Okay, well, why don't we head into town now to get some breakfast before you start? My treat." Amir's voice was forcefully cheerful.

"Yes," I said immediately. "Let's do that. Let's go."

Without waiting for them to answer, I locked the back door and strode into the hallway, grabbing my bag and standing by the front door to wait for them. Edel and Amir emerged a few seconds later, expressions hesitant.

"Um, okay. Let me—I'll just go grab our bags." Amir jogged up the stairs.

Edel approached me cautiously, brows pinched with worry. Before they could speak, I wearily said, "Sorry. I'm just—I'm really tired."

“That’s okay, *Engel.*” They hesitated, then placed a gentle hand on my arm. “Ari, are you sure you’re okay? Is everything… okay here?”

“Everything’s fine,” I said automatically, staring at the front door.

Their hand slid slowly off my arm. “Okay. And… everything’s okay with Theo still?”

I bristled defensively. “Theo’s great. Everything is great with Theo.”

“You just seem—”

“Edel, seriously, can you just stop? I said I’m fine. I’m tired. I’m hungover. I just want to go to work.”

I was pretty sure I’d never snapped at Edel like that before. My gut clenched with guilt as I looked over and saw them nod quickly, taking a step back.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked. My eyes got hot, so I blinked rapidly. “Honestly, I’m just tired.”

“Alright.” Edel didn’t sound certain. “If you’re sure that’s all it is.”

“That’s all it is,” I said, voice devoid of any emotion, as Amir came down the stairs holding their shared overnight bag.

“All set?” he said, brown eyes flickering between us, sensing the awkward atmosphere.

Athena raced into the front hall when she heard me open the door. I tried not to let myself worry about what might happen to her while I was out and she was alone here. After giving her a final kiss on the head, I followed Edel and Amir outside and turned to lock the door.

The sound of Athena’s sad whines and claws scratching on the door made me freeze in place for a second, my breath catching. A shudder raced down my spine, so I quickly locked up and backed away from the door rapidly, away from the noise that was making me start to shake.

As Amir got into the driver’s seat and started the engine, Edel slid into the back with me. I stiffened, not wanting to be questioned by them anymore. Not wanting to be babied.

“You don’t have to sit in the back with me,” I said dully, keeping my head turned under the pretence of looking out the window.

“I want to.” Edel was trying to make their voice light. “I don’t get to see you much anymore, and I miss you.”

Guilt churned in my belly. Forcing a weak smile onto my face, I turned to look at them. “I miss you too.” Clearing my hoarse throat, I added,

“You’ll have to have us over for dinner once you’ve got the flat to yourselves.”

Amir chuckled from the front seat as he drove carefully down the long driveway. “That sounds great, but we’d have to order in. I think I’d be too nervous to cook for master chef Theo.”

I smiled blandly and looked out the window again. The car was silent as we pulled out of the drive onto the quiet country road. Fields stretched out either side of us, dew sparkling in the sunlight.

“Did either of you hear anything in the night?” I heard myself ask after several long minutes.

Amir glanced in the rear-view mirror to frown at me. “Hear anything? Like what? Did something happen?”

I was worryingly numb as I looked back out the window. So that was it, then. I was imagining it. If they really hadn’t heard that thing running around the house and screaming and hammering on the door, it had all been in my head.

“No,” I said quietly, resting my weary head against the window. “Nothing happened.”

CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE

Inaya sent me home after a few hours.

I'd already smashed a vase, spilled water all over the floor and nearly cut myself on some shears. My brain was foggy with exhaustion, head pounding from dehydration.

By the time the cab pulled up outside Theo's house, I was too tired to be truly scared anymore. I was too tired to be anything. I felt hollow as I stepped inside, wearily greeting Athena when she bounded over excitedly.

After shedding my bag and jacket, I went into the kitchen to let her out and stood at the sink gulping down a huge glass of water. Once she was back inside, I locked the door and headed upstairs, dragging my feet.

I had just enough energy left to change into my pyjamas before I collapsed onto the bed. Glancing at my phone before I put it on the nightstand, I saw a text from Edel.

Thank you for having us, it was a really lovely night. I know I keep asking, but are you sure you're okay? I'm a bit worried about you.

I couldn't bring myself to reply. Setting the phone down, I dragged the covers over myself and shut my eyes. Sunlight streamed in through the open curtains, and I quickly grew too warm, but I couldn't move. Within moments, I was asleep.

I COULD TELL it was dark when I came to, even though I didn't open my eyes. My headache was finally gone, and the house was silent, the air cooler than it had been when I got home.

I realised what had woken me when the bed dipped under Theo's weight as he settled beside me. A tired, relieved sigh left my mouth as I shifted round to face him, planning on tucking myself against his big body and breathing in his scent.

He didn't move towards me. I could feel his presence beside me, but he was perfectly still. Blinking my eyes open sleepily, I began reaching out a hand for him.

It wasn't Theo lying beside me.

The room was dark, but I could still make out the shadowy bulk stretched out on the mattress, its monstrous horned head resting on Theo's pillow. White pupils watched me, unwavering from my face. Sharp teeth gleamed in the wide, manic smile fixed permanently on its face, never faltering.

I screamed.

Once I started, I couldn't stop. Flinging myself backwards and out of the bed, I banged the back of my head against the sharp corner of the bedside table. My hands scrabbled over the surface, clawing for my phone. I knocked over the lamp but managed to turn it on, but it didn't help. It didn't make it go away. It was still there, lying on Theo's side of the bed, eyes wide as it stared at me, still grinning.

Something sharp pricked at my hands and feet as I scrambled up, and I realised there were flowers *everywhere.* Sweet briar roses covered the bed and the floor, petals and whole stems, a sea of them. Thorns pierced my bare soles as I ran over them for the door, slipping on petals, sobbing out frantic breaths. I barely felt the pain, too desperate to get away.

More flowers covered the hallway floor, making a path down the stairs. Tears streamed from my face as I stumbled down them, not looking back to see if it was chasing me. The trail of flowers curved around at the bottom of the stairs, leading directly to the cellar door and vanishing underneath it.

I ran in the opposite direction, thorns embedding deeper into my soles with every step. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would burst out of my chest, sweat pouring from my body, my vision blinking in and out with pure terror. The kind of terror I'd never felt before, not even the night before when it had whispered my name through the door. Not even when I

had come face to face with it in the cellar. It had been *lying next to me* in the dark. It had been only a foot away. How long had it been standing in the bedroom watching me sleep? How close had it got to scatter those rose petals all over the bed? All around me?

I didn't know where Athena was, but I couldn't stop running, my legs flying over the tiles. Bursting into the library, I tripped on my way to the winter garden. It hadn't gone in there before. It had stayed at the door, scratching to come in. It was the only place I felt even marginally safe.

I could hear the drag of its hooves over the tiles in the front hall as I flung open the winter garden door and slammed it shut behind me, wishing desperately that it had a lock. I dragged a heavy plant pot in front of it, the leaves of the huge monstera within swaying gently.

There was enough moonlight streaming in for me to see the pot I'd knocked over the night before still on the ground, dirt spilled everywhere, the tall corn plant looking sad on its side. I cried out weakly in pain as I limped to the far end of the room, leaving smears of blood on the white tiles from the countless tiny cuts on my feet, thorns still pushing into my skin.

I curled myself up into a tight ball in the corner of the room, my hands shaking so hard I couldn't work my phone at first. The display said *3.08 a.m*.

The moment Theo answered the call, and I heard his smooth, deep voice say, "Hey, dimples," in a mildly surprised tone, I started sobbing and couldn't stop.

"Ari?" Theo sounded more alert. His voice echoed like he was on speakerphone. "What's wrong?"

"Th-th-there's something h-h-here," I wept, barely able to get the words out. "P-please come home. Please come home."

"I'm nearly there." In the background, I faintly heard the rev of a car speeding up. "Ari, what's there? Is someone in the house? You need to get out. Don't worry about Athena, just go. *Fuck,* I knew I shouldn't have left you without a car."

"It's not real," I sobbed, clutching at my hair. "I k-keep seeing it but n-no one else does, but it was in the bed and—th-there are flowers everywhere. It was in the bed with me." I sniffed, snot dripping from my nose, eyes streaming with hot tears. "Please come home, Theo, please. Please—"

“Who was in the bed?” he barked, voice tense with agitation. “Ari, you need to get out of the house if someone’s in there—”

“There’s no one in the house,” I sobbed, interrupting him. “It’s not a person. It’s not a person.”

“What?” Theo spluttered, sounding confused. “But you—”

I cut him off with a hoarse scream when something started hammering on the door. Trying to push myself harder into the wall, I gurgled with frantic sobs. “Oh god, it’s—It’s at the door. It’s banging on the door.”

Theo was silent for a second, before he said, “I can’t hear anything, Ari.”

“It’s banging on the door,” I shouted, my voice raw. “Can’t you hear it?”

Furious snarls and growls were coming from the door, which rattled continuously in its frame under the onslaught. I curled up into a tighter ball, struggling to breathe.

“Ari, listen to me.” I could hear Theo trying to keep his voice calm, but it shook with fear for me. “I’ll be home in about twenty minutes, okay? If someone’s in the house, you need to get out and call the police. Don’t try and get Athena first. Just get out and hide. I’ll find you.”

“That won’t work,” I sobbed. “That won’t work. It’ll follow me. It’ll get me.”

“*What* will?” Agitation made him snap. I could hear the whine of the car engine down the phone. “I’m driving as fast as I can, sweetheart. Just stay on the phone to me but keep quiet, okay? You need to keep quiet.”

A rabid, snorting growl from the door made me scream.

“Ari, you *need to keep quiet*.” Stress coloured Theo’s tone. “Just take a deep breath, okay? You need to breathe. Breathe for me, sweetheart.”

I sucked in a shuddering breath, wild eyes locked on the door at the other end of the room. I could hear it pacing out there, its hooves dragging over the ground impossibly fast, back and forth.

“Exhale slowly through your nose.”

I listened to Theo’s voice, letting out an unsteady breath.

“And another.”

I was still shaking uncontrollably, my heart pounding too fast, but I gradually began to calm down as I stared at the door. It was still out there, but it wasn’t coming in. Like it couldn’t get to me in here.

Once I was breathing more steadily, weak sobs hiccupping from my throat, Theo said, “Good, sweetheart. Now, can you get out of the house?

Where are you?"

"No," I whispered frantically. "I can't leave. I d-don't think it can get me in here."

"*Where?* Where are you?"

"Th-the winter garden." I jumped with a tiny scream as it kicked the door, a single booming thud of its cloven hoof.

I heard Theo suck in a sharp breath. His voice was strangely tight when he repeated, "The winter garden?"

"Yes," I whispered. "It—it tried to get me last night, but I was in here and it couldn't g-get in. It's at the door." Hysteria rose again, quickening my breaths. "It's at the door, Theo. Please come home. Please come home. I don't want to be here on my own anymore." I was sobbing again, unable to stop. "Please come home."

"I'm nearly there, sweetheart." Theo's voice was rough with some emotion, and it shook as he spoke again. "Just stay where you are. Don't move. I'll be there soon."

I heard him suck in a shuddering breath, his voice devastated when he said, "I'm sorry, Ari. God, I'm so sorry."

I didn't know what he was apologising for, but I was too terrified to ponder it. My ear throbbed from how hard I had the phone pressed to it, my fingers sweating against the plastic case. I shuddered when I felt the soft, velvety rasp of the petal stuck to it against my thumb.

My feet were throbbing with pain, thin trickles of blood tickling my soles. I curled my toes and inhaled sharply from the sting, thorns still embedded deep in my skin.

I was still weeping, unable to stop. The thing had gone quiet at the door, but I knew it was still out there.

"I'm just a few minutes away, sweetheart," Theo said tensely down the phone. "Just stay on the phone to me. Don't—don't leave the winter garden. Stay in there."

"Please," I sobbed weakly, unable to form any other words. I tipped my head against the wall. "I'm s-so scared, Theo."

"I'm sorry, Ari." His voice was hoarse. "I didn't—I'll be there soon."

My vision greyed out when claws dragged down the door in a long, unbroken rasp of sharp nails gouging into wood. I could hear its low, rabid breaths chuffing through the tiny gap in the doorframe, like it was pressed right up against it.

“It’s still out there,” I whispered, jumping when it let out an angry snort. “D-don’t—It might get you—”

“Nothing’s going to get me,” Theo said calmly, making me blink wetly as I stared down at the dark tiles.

Did he think I was crazy?

He probably did. *I* thought I was crazy. He’d said he couldn’t hear it hammering on the door when it *had* been. Edel and Amir hadn’t heard anything the night before. I’d been seeing it, hearing it for months, and Theo and Athena never reacted to anything.

A new kind of terror started rising up inside me, a tangle of fear and dread that I was losing my mind and Theo was going to leave me when he realised. But before I could start pleading with him to believe me, I heard the crunch of gravel as a car sped onto the drive.

The creak of the handbrake being applied came through the phone, followed by a car door opening and slamming shut.

“I’m here,” Theo said, his boots crunching over the drive, and then I heard the jangle of keys as he unlocked the door.

His footsteps echoed over the tiles both in my ear and beyond the winter garden door. The thing had gone silent.

Theo’s breaths sped up as he ran through the house to reach me. His footsteps grew hollow as he stepped into the library, and then the winter garden door was bursting open, making me jump as the monstera pot screeched over the tiles, getting shoved out of the way until it tipped over with a crash.

Theo shouldered his way in through the gap and turned on the light, making me blink rapidly. The call disconnected as he lowered his hand, chest heaving as he stared around the room, looking for me. He stared at the broken plant pots, then went pale when he saw the smears of blood on the white tiles from my feet. He followed them with his gaze, and his eyes flared when he saw me curled up into a pathetic ball at the far end of the room.

“Ari.” He ran toward me, dropping onto his knees and pulling me into his arms.

I burst into fresh tears, clinging to him, still terrified but beyond relieved that he was here. My phone slipped from my hand and clattered onto the tiles.

“Where are you hurt?” he demanded, hands running over every part of me he could reach. “What happened?”

“Th-the th-th-thorns.” I could hardly speak, crying too hard, getting snot and tears all over his shirt as I buried my face in his chest.

“Thorns?” He pulled back to check my hands, then ran frantic hands down my legs to my feet. I jerked when he gently lifted one to inspect the sole. “Oh, sweetheart.”

I yanked my foot free and leaned forward, clutching his shirt as I stared up at him through blurry eyes. “D-did you see them? The flowers?”

If he’d seen them, I couldn’t have made them up. They had to be there. They had to be real.

“Flowers? I—Ari.” Theo gently pushed my sweaty hair back from my tear-streaked face. He stared down at me, the skin around his eyes tight. “You need to tell me exactly what happened.”

Fuck, where was I supposed to start? I could hardly think, my hands shaking as I curled my fingers tighter into his shirt. I swallowed, trying to regulate my hitching breaths as my mind raced.

If I told him everything, would he think I was insane?

I parted my trembling lips, licking the salty tears from them, but before I could speak, movement behind Theo made me scream. I tried to climb his body as he went stiff, his head swinging round.

“It’s just Athena.” He smoothed back my hair, pressing his lips to the top of my head. “It’s just Athena, sweetheart.”

“It was there,” I sobbed weakly into his shirt. “It was at the door. It was trying to get to me.”

I jumped again when Athena’s cold nose snuffled at my ankle, giving it a lick as she whined. Theo reached down to scratch her head, then gently told her to lie down.

“Ari.” He cupped my face and forced me to look up at him. “Tell me what happened.”

I stared up at him, breathing hard. My fingers clenched tighter, and he winced as I pulled on his chest hair beneath his shirt, but he didn’t pry my hands loose.

“I’m not crazy,” I told him shakily, realising how crazy it probably made me sound.

He frowned, thumbing the wetness off my cheek. “I know you’re not.”

My mouth trembled as I sobbed, fighting his hold to bury my face in his neck. “But you’ll think I am when I tell you.”

“I won’t.” Theo’s voice sounded strange. “I promise you, I won’t.”

I pursed my trembling lips, trying to breathe in his scent to calm down. He was here. He’d keep me safe. He’d believe me. I had to tell myself that.

“I’ve been seeing things,” I heard myself whisper. “And wh-when you left it got so much worse, and when Edel and Amir were here I went down to the cellar to get some wine—”

Theo went totally stiff against me. “You went into the cellar.”

“—and there were flowers and I followed them and it—it went on for ages and then I—” I shuddered, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to block out what I’d seen down there. “I saw it.”

“Saw what, Ari?” Theo sounded like he didn’t want to know the answer.

“I don’t know,” I sobbed. “I don’t know what it was. A… a monster. Like an animal. It had horns and hooves and its—its face was—was…”

I shuddered again, but now that the words were spilling out of me, my body was calming. Like a pressure valve had been released. All the fear and worries that had plagued me for months, suffering from this thing in silence, were finally being vocalised. I was finally telling someone.

“It came back,” I whispered. “I couldn’t sleep so I came in here to read, and it—it was looking for me. It s-started knocking on the door, whispering my name. And then tonight it—” I let out a weak sob. “It got into the bed with me.”

I could feel tension making Theo vibrate as he held me tightly.

“Fuck,” he bit out.

I lifted my head, gazing at him pleadingly as I clutched his chest. “I’m not crazy. It was real. Please believe me, Theo. Please.”

“I believe you,” he said straight away, eyes tight. “I believe you, Ari.”

Relief made me weep again, turning my cheek into the big palm cradling it as I shut my eyes. “Thank you. Th-thank you. I thought—” I sobbed. “I thought I was losing my mind.”

I heard him swallow. His hand was achingly gentle on my face as he thumbed away fresh tears.

“So it—it’s the same thing you saw in your old flat. After our first date,” he said quietly, and I blinked my eyes open.

I’d told him about that—about the first time I’d seen it. He remembered.

“Yes.” I nodded desperately. “That.”

He swallowed, staring at me. “How… how long have you still been seeing it?”

“Ever s-since then.” My eyes filling again, I shook my head. “I’m sorry I brought it here. I’m so sorry.”

“Ari.” Theo sounded agonised. He pulled me back into his arms, burying his face in my hair. “You—Why didn’t you tell me?” he croaked. “You should’ve told me.”

I sobbed. “I d-didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“I told you I believed you,” he said immediately, voice hard. “I told you. You should’ve told me, Ari.”

“I’m sorry,” I wept, and heard him exhale sharply.

“No, I’m sorry.” He pressed his lips to my hair. “I’m so sorry, Ari. I—I shouldn’t have gone on that fucking business trip. I’m sorry I left you here.”

I shook my head weakly. “You didn’t know.”

When he pulled back and cupped my face again, his eyes looked glassy. I let out a shuddering breath, trying to calm myself down. He believed me. I’d told him, and he believed me. The relief made me go weak.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” I whispered, my chin trembling. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, dimples.” His voice was hoarse. “I love you.”

He still loved me. Even after I’d told him. Even after I’d admitted to bringing that thing into his house.

I smiled for what felt like the first time in days and days. It was tiny and shaky, but it was there. “I love you too.”

“When’s the last time you slept?” he asked, gently tracing the shadow under my eye with his thumb.

“I—” I started to shake again, eyes darting. “I was asleep when it—when it got into bed with me.”

“Okay,” Theo said instantly, making soothing noises to calm me back down. “I’m here now. I’ll keep you safe. I promise, Ari.” His voice grew hard, eyes flinty with anger. “I will keep you safe.”

“I know,” I whispered.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

THEO

Once Ari was calmer, I sat back on my heels and reached down to carefully inspect his feet again. My throat closed up at the sight of the thorns piercing his delicate skin, his blood stark red against the pale flesh.

"I need to go and get the first aid kit," I told him gently. "We need to get the thorns out."

His breath hitched, red, swollen eyes darting to the door behind me.

"You're safe in here," I told him, because he was. "I'll be right back, I promise."

His chin trembled. "B-but what if it gets you—"

"He—It won't. I'll run, okay? I'm just going to grab the first aid kit, and I'll be right back."

"O-okay," Ari whispered, curling back up into a tiny ball.

I gestured at Athena, whose head lifted from the floor. "Athena will stay with you."

Ari nodded, eyes darting between Athena and the door. My knee cracked as I straightened up, and I told Athena to wait before making my way to the door.

I was trembling with rage by the time I reached the downstairs bathroom, where I kept the first aid kit. I grabbed it from the cabinet as well as a flannel, which I wet under the warm water. I didn't say anything, but I could feel Him.

I'd promised Ari I would go straight back to him, but I stopped dead after leaving the bathroom to stare at the cellar door. Pink flowers were strewn over the stairs, making a path directly towards it. My teeth clenched, jaw muscle spasming, but I kept my promise, forcing myself to turn away and jog back to the winter garden.

Ari was exactly where I'd left him, but Athena had curled up against his side, and his fingers were clenched tight in her thick fur. His breathing was calmer though, and his tear-streaked face softened with relief when he saw me.

My chest ached. Kneeling at his feet, I gently propped his heels on my thighs. After digging the tweezers out of the kit, I glanced up at him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as I started pulling the thorns from his feet as carefully as possible. But they were embedded deep, so I had to dig around to get a firm grip, making him wince and gasp.

Once all the thorns were out, I lifted his foot to my mouth and kissed the top of it.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again, as if that could ever absolve me.

Grabbing the warm flannel, I gently wiped his soles clean of blood. Then I smoothed an antiseptic wipe over the cuts, resisting the urge to apologise again when Ari flinched from the sting. The cuts were still seeping blood, so I carefully wrapped both feet in bandages.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” I asked hoarsely, sliding my hands up his calves under his pyjama bottoms. The material was damp with cold sweat.

He shook his head, eyelids drooping as he leaned his temple against the wall. He looked so tired, his skin grey and drawn tight, eyes red and swollen from crying. I wanted to throw myself at his bandaged feet and beg for forgiveness.

“You need to sleep, sweetheart,” I murmured.

He stiffened instantly, eyes darting to the door before he shook his head. “I—I can’t—Please don’t make me go out there.”

My chest constricted so much I struggled to breathe for a second. Gathering him into my arms, I gently lifted him off the ground, my back twinging. He clung to me, faint tremors still coursing through his body.

“We’ll sleep in here,” I whispered, because it was safe in here.

He sagged with relief against me, tucking his face under my chin as I carried him to the rattan seating. It was going to be uncomfortable, but I was pretty sure Ari was too exhausted to notice.

“Do you want me to go and get you clean pyjamas?” I asked as we settled back on the sofa and I pulled the blanket over us, tucking it tight around him.

He shook his head immediately, burrowing into my side. “No. Please, just stay here.”

“Alright,” I whispered, kissing the top of his head.

I felt him relax fully against me as he let out a long sigh. It took him only minutes to fall asleep, his head on my chest as I ran my fingers through his hair. The rattan armrest was hard against the back of my head, my boots hanging over the other end, Ari curled up against my chest.

Once I was sure that he was in a deep sleep, I carefully eased out from beneath him. Athena lifted her head from the floor, but didn't follow me as I silently walked out of the room and through the library.

Rage flared again when I saw the flowers leading to the cellar door. Fishing the key out of my pocket, I unlocked the padlock and pulled the door open. The light was already on, making my gut clench. Ari had gone down there. Without me.

My footsteps echoed as I descended and stepped into the wine cellar. I could feel Him already, the low rumbling thrum of His presence, but I didn't acknowledge Him as I stared down at the pile of wilted flowers in the centre of the room. The path leading to the other door down here.

Hands clenching into fists, I walked to the closed door and lifted the latch. Damp, musty heat wafted over my face. I could hear Him snarling out deep, calm breaths in the dark.

Stepping into the room, I let the door close behind me, plunging me into complete darkness. My shirt began to stick to me immediately, the walls sweating, steam tickling my fingertips as I forced my hands to relax at my sides.

I took a deep breath.

"You never told me you were showing yourself to him."

I felt Him stalk closer in the dark until his chuffing breaths ruffled my hair, tickled my beard. The smell of the earth burning filled my nose, bringing with it a maelstrom of visions and emotions. Sharp blades plunging into soft flesh, blood pumping over my fingers hot and thick. The way I'd come to crave that unique heat as it coated me, knowing it made Him happy. Knowing it pleased Him.

Utter devotion. Unending worship. My reasons for tying myself to Him had been selfish at first—avarice, a lust for power, a chance to be unstoppable and never age or grow weak and end up rotting in the ground like everyone else. But at some point, I had grown to worship *Him*. Not for what He could give me. Just to feel His pleasure when I sacrificed in His name. Just to hear His praise when I did what He demanded.

He was my god.

But now, my once-unshakable piety felt fragile. Felt *tainted*. He had been terrorising Ari for months, and I hated the jealousy that slithered through me at the thought, even as it mingled with fury for what He had put Ari through.

In this moment, I hated Him as much as I worshipped Him.

"I don't need to tell you anything," He rasped in my ear. I felt His incorporeal form circle me, and I shuddered when the caress of invisible lips brushed the nape of my neck.

I swallowed. "You're scaring him."

He chuffed an amused sound. "Only because he doesn't yet understand. Tell him everything, and perhaps he will grow less fearful. Perhaps he will begin to worship me as you do."

"If I tell him everything, he'll leave me." My voice cracked.

He snorted again. "Perhaps he will."

Jaw clenching, I twisted my head to try and see Him, knowing it was pointless. "Is that why you're doing this? You want him to leave?"

My devotion was split now, between two. I hadn't thought He could feel envy, but perhaps He could. Perhaps He had grown as possessive of me as I had of Him, and sharing my devotion made Him angry.

"I don't have to explain anything to you."

Anger exploded inside me, so hot and fast I struggled to tamp it down, even as my stomach clenched with fear of what He might do.

"Leave him alone," I snapped. I'd never spoken to Him like this before. "He's terrified. He's confused. He doesn't want any of this. What will it take for you to leave him alone? What do you want?"

He was silent for a long moment, before I felt the sting of invisible claws against the nape of my neck, making me shudder.

"I want *him*," He rasped in my ear.

Terror for Ari flared, mingling with my rage. "You said you wouldn't take him from me. You said I could keep him."

"And you can," He crooned, voice rumbling in the pit of my stomach. "But I want him too."

My throat closed up as I realised what He meant. What He wanted with Ari.

"No," I whispered hoarsely.

"*No?*" He roared, making me flinch. "*You* are telling *me* no?"

Unseen claws raked over my stomach beneath my shirt, the stinging pain flaring before it faded just as quickly.

"You forget yourself, Théodore," He snarled. "You are my vessel. That's all you are and all you will ever be, from the moment you gave your

pathetic mortal life to me. I showed you mercy by letting you keep him, and you dare tell me *no?*"

"Please," I croaked, trembling as His rage filled the stagnant air. "I'll bring you anyone else. I—I'll—"

"My hunger for him is not like the others," He rasped, and dread squeezed my stomach. "I want him as you do, my loyal servant. He is so…"

I felt the air shudder around me, His voice dipping even deeper, filled with a hunger that made a confusing blend of fear and envy swirl inside me.

"Pure. Sweet. The sweetest bloom. I yearn to protect that sweetness as much as my instinct tells me to destroy it."

My eyes darted with confusion in the dark. He wanted to… protect Ari? But He had only ever sought out darkness. Death. Blood and carnage.

Evil.

"Wh-why?" I heard myself ask hoarsely.

"Don't question me," He roared. "You don't ever get to question me."

He was right. I hadn't questioned Him when He told me to kill my first wife. Then my second. Then my third. Or the timid bakery owner I'd been sleeping with in Paris in the late 1840s. The grizzled, hardened outlaw who'd let me fuck him for months when I travelled to America in the 1870s. The haughty banker in London in the 1910s who'd been terrified of being caught having sex with another man, but had kept coming back. The lonely housewife in Cornwall whose husband had been away at war, stationed in France, whose life I had slunk into at His request.

I'd killed all of them for Him without question, because He'd told me to. But Ari was different. I wasn't going to let Him play with Ari's life, even if He didn't want him dead.

This was the first time He'd shown interest in a person in this way. His interest in someone had always meant one thing—that they were to become the next person I had to kill for Him. I'd been terrified that it had been His plan for Ari after our first date—when Ari had told me that he'd seen Him in his room.

This was the first time I had ever truly loved someone. I was a selfish man. Greedy and vain and uncaring of who I had hurt in my long life with false affections and empty promises.

But Ari… My entire being yearned for him. He made me want to be better. He made me want to be *good*. He made me want to be the man he thought I was. Not that I ever could be.

Maybe that was why He was showing this unique hunger for Ari. Maybe we had been tied for so long, my life dependent on Him, that some of me had bled into Him, just as I allowed Him to bleed into me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my knees buckling with the urge to sink to them. To lie prone before Him in supplication.

He huffed, and I felt His phantom teeth rasp over my ear, making me shudder with a perverted blend of fear and lust. "I know you are, my pet."

I felt Him retreat, sinking back into the shadows. White pupils flared in a dark corner, his magnificent, monstrous form looming, blacker than black.

"He will accept me eventually," He rasped. "And if he doesn't, I will make his mind crack until he has no choice but to succumb. He is ours, Théodore. Not just yours. You don't get to keep him from me. You are nothing but an extension of me. Everything you have, *I* possess."

I shuddered, hanging my head. He was right. Everything I had—my life, my house, my career, even my body—he possessed.

"B-but you—you said I could keep him—"

"Keep him for *us*."

I shook my head, licking my dry lips. "He might not accept you—"

"He will."

"And if he—if he doesn't? If I send him away—If I stop"—I fought the urge to wrap my arms around myself protectively, utter sorrow stabbing my chest—"being with him, will you leave him alone?"

The thought was unbearable. Being without Ari—without his sweetness, his love, his body—would be the one thing that made me want to give everything up. To end it all.

I had finally found someone I wanted to be selfless for, and I couldn't.

It didn't matter anyway, because He said one simple word that made me shiver, my stomach plummeting with the realisation of how much danger I had put Ari in. How much he was going to hate me.

"No."

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

I slept until the afternoon.

When I eventually woke, bright sunlight was streaming in through the big winter garden windows, warming me where I was curled up under a blanket on the sofa. My head pounded with dehydration when I lifted it, my eyes tight from crying.

Athena was napping on the floor in front of me, on her back with her legs flopped open. I reached down to give her belly a scratch, soaking in the warmth and comfort of the downy soft fur there.

I felt hollow. Like there was nothing left in me to be afraid anymore, to be worried that I was going insane, seeing things that weren't there. I laid my palm flat on Athena's chest to feel its steady rise and fall as she breathed deeply in sleep, content and warm and happy. I wished I could be like her.

Some of the hollowness was chased out by an overwhelming rush of love when Theo walked into the room, but it was quickly followed by guilt. He looked exhausted, his face pale and tense, eyes marred by shadows.

I forced myself to sit up and smile at him. I had to be strong. I couldn't become a total mess, completely dependent on him, clinging to his side constantly. That wasn't me, and I hated that I could feel myself becoming that way.

He knelt in front of me, making Athena jerk awake with a snort. Clasping my hand in both of his, he lifted it to his mouth and pressed his lips there, eyes slipping shut.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was hoarse when he lifted his head. "I'm sorry I left you. I was cleaning up."

I tensed instantly, knowing what he was referring to. The flowers. The roses strewn everywhere, making a path to the cellar door, surrounding me in the bed. The ones that had pricked my feet, which were throbbing under the bandages.

I glanced behind him and realised he'd cleaned up the smashed pots as well. Relief made me sigh, knowing I wouldn't have to leave this room and see the evidence of what had happened.

"I feel better." I turned my cheek into his palm when he cupped my face, his thumb tracing the corner of my eye.

He let out a shaky exhale. "Good."

"I need some water, though." My mouth tasted awful, and my throat was painfully dry. Pain stabbed behind my eyes every time I moved them, telling me I was dehydrated.

Theo jumped up. "I'll get you some. You stay here."

Even though fear lurched through me, I shook my head and stood up, wincing as all the tiny cuts on my soles sang with pain. "No. I'll come with you. I can't just stay in here."

The thought of leaving this room made my heartrate start to rise, but I wasn't going to let myself be cowed completely. I wasn't going to hide away in this room and let that thing win.

In the light of day, I could push back the fear enough to let grim determination take its place. I was going to do whatever it took to make this stop. I'd never been a religious person, but I'd go to church every fucking week if that was what it took. I'd read up on rituals to banish demons. I'd get an exorcist in here.

Because I knew that was what the thing was now. A demon. Whether it was in a religious sense or something my mind had conjured, it was demonic. Evil. It was trying to destroy me.

"Ari." Theo's voice shook. "You should stay in here."

"No, Theo." I started limping slowly towards the door. "I need to shower as well. I need to feel normal."

"I—" I heard him swallow. "Let me carry you at least."

I shook my head. "I'm okay."

He hovered beside me as I walked carefully through the library, my scalp prickling with the instinctive terror that started to rise before I pushed it back. The front hall was dim, the tiles cool under my toes as we crossed

it, heading for the kitchen, but bright flickering in the corner of my eye made me freeze, turning my head towards the sitting room.

There was a small bonfire burning on the lawn, visible through the sitting room windows. I stared.

“What’s that?” I asked quietly.

Theo tensed, gently palming my lower back to get me moving again. “The flowers.”

Seeing them being burned made my body calm. It was like the presence of that thing was being reduced to nothing but ash. Maybe it would help exorcise it from the house. Maybe it would make it all stop.

Theo helped me into one of the island seats before pouring me a glass of water. He told me to sip it slowly, so I did, watching as he made some toast and slathered it in crunchy peanut butter—the kind I liked. He gently urged me to eat it, and once I started I realised how ravenous I was.

My full belly was making me tired again, but I knew I needed to wash. I was caked in dry sweat, my pyjamas crusty and uncomfortable. Theo helped me upstairs, my feet tender and sore, and stripped both of us down in the bathroom before getting into the shower with me.

I sighed when the warm water rained down on my head. I didn’t move for long moments, letting it sluice over my face and wash away the sting of dried tears, not until Theo gently cradled me from behind, his warm body pressing against my back as his arms circled my waist.

I leaned back into him, closing my eyes at the feel of his lips pressing against the crown of my head. He made me feel safe, letting my body sag with relief against him, beyond grateful to be back in his arms. When tears pricked at my eyes, I forced myself to straighten up and reach for the shampoo.

I washed my hair while Theo smoothed shower gel over my shoulders and down my back, methodically washing me with careful hands. Once my hair was rinsed clean, he gently spun me round and started on my chest, my arms, my neck. I felt my mouth tip up into a smile when he gently scrubbed behind my ears, but it dropped with a gasp when his hands dipped and reverently cupped me.

He washed me there too, making my cock twitch and start to perk up. I slid my hands over his stomach, up his chest, running my fingertips through the dark hair that had been flattened by the water. When his soapy fingers

dipped lower, smoothing over my taint to my hole, I moaned and tipped my head into his chest.

Neither of us spoke. I clung to him until he lowered himself to his knees, pressing his lips to my stomach, my hipbone. Cupping his hands under the spray, he carefully poured the water over my half-hard cock to wash away the suds.

Then he was leaning in and sucking me into his mouth. I gasped at the sudden wet heat that enveloped the head of my cock, my hand fumbling for the knob to turn the shower off. With the sound of the water gone, my gasping breaths filled the room as I reached down with trembling hands to thread my fingers through Theo's wet hair. He moaned around me, low and hoarse, pierced tongue smoothing up the underside of my cock as he sucked.

My head tipped back against the shower wall, but I raised it again just as quickly so I could watch him worship me with his mouth. His wet beard tickled my tight sac, his long fingers clutching at my hips desperately, steadying me, until one slid between my legs and a finger traced over my hole. I gasped when he sank it inside, clenching around the welcome intrusion. My cock grew agonisingly hard in his mouth, and I jerked with a plaintive moan when he pulled back to tongue the sensitive head, rasping his tongue bar over the sensitive V.

"Theo," I whispered, clutching at his wet hair as I stared down at him.

He groaned again, the sound desperate and rough with emotion as he sank his mouth back down my cock, sucking with long, deep draws that made my hips strain forward to chase the intense pleasure. A second finger joined the first inside me, bringing with it a sharp sting that quickly faded.

He never sped up. He sucked me slowly, fingers curving inside me as they slid in and out at a leisurely pace. He was breathing hard through his nose, his body trembling against me. It went on and on until I was shaking, gripping his hair tighter, trying not to buck my hips in a manic rush to reach my peak.

When it eventually hit me, it was slow and lazy and mind-numbingly intense, making me tip my head back and cry out. I heard Theo groan, his mouth still sucking hungrily, his throat working to swallow everything I gave him. Even when my orgasm stopped, he kept sucking until my hips twitched with sensitivity and I palmed his head to urge it back.

My softening cock slipped from his mouth, and he buried his face in my hip. Smoothing my hand over his head, I tried to calm my racing heart and slow my breaths. Theo's cock bucked between his legs, stiff and flushed a deep red. I wanted to worship him as he'd just worshipped me, but when I tried to kneel, the hands on my hips stopped me.

Theo shook his head against my hip.

"I'm sorry," I heard him whisper.

"What?" I tugged on his arm until he finally rose to his feet. My gut clenched when I saw the glassiness in his eyes as he gazed down at me miserably. "Why are you sorry?"

Shock jolted through me when Theo's mouth trembled, his eyes filling.

"I—I left you here. I left you with—I didn't know, Ari." He let out a weak sob. "I didn't know."

Seeing him break down gave me strength. He had been there for me when I needed him, so I needed to do the same. He was exhausted. He'd driven through the night to get back to me, and instead of being able to slip into bed and fall asleep after a long trip, he'd instead had to console me while I sobbed in a useless heap on the floor, ranting about a thing chasing me through the house and hammering on the door.

"Shh, it's okay." I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his chest, resting my cheek there. "I'm okay."

Theo let out a shuddering breath, pressing his mouth to the top of my head. He pulled me in tighter. "I love you, Ari. So much it feels like—like…"

"I love you too," I murmured, before pulling back to open the shower door and grab his towel. "You need to sleep," I said gently as I led him out of the shower, water dripping from our bodies onto the bath mat. "You're exhausted. I'm sorry I caused you so much stress. I'm sorry I scared you."

His wide shoulders shuddered, face hidden as he roughly scrubbed at his hair with the towel. "Don't apologise."

Wrapping my own towel around my hips, I tangled my fingers through his to lead him out of the bathroom and across the hall to our bedroom. I let out a silent breath when I saw all the flowers gone and clean sheets on the bed. All traces of that thing removed.

After quickly rubbing away the moisture clinging to my skin, I dropped the towel and led Theo to the bed, settling in beside him when he lay back

with a groan. But he was still tense, haunted eyes staring up at the canopy of the bed, mouth a thin line within his blue beard.

The overwhelming need to be close to him rose from the pit of my stomach, stronger and more intense than it had ever been before. I moved closer before sliding my leg over his hips, rising up as I straddled him.

Lowering my head, I found his lips in a kiss that tried to convey everything I felt for him. How much I loved him. How grateful I was for him. How safe he made me feel. Theo shuddered, kissing me back as his hands slid up my thighs before gripping my hips, his fingers digging in like he was afraid I'd stop.

Our tongues glided together, the kiss growing hotter and deeper as our cocks stiffened and rubbed between our tightly pressed bodies. I didn't stop kissing him. I couldn't. Not until the need to feel him moving inside me became too much, and I finally lifted my head to reach over to the nightstand.

"Ari." Theo's hoarse voice made me pause and look down at him. His throat bobbed. "Shouldn't we—We should talk about—"

"No." I teased my fingers through his chest hair. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But I—I need to—"

"Theo." My mouth tipped down, eyes shifting away from him as tension began to rise in me again. "Please. I don't want to talk about it right now. I just want to feel normal. Please," I repeated, looking into his dark eyes, then whispered, "I just—I need to be close to you."

He swallowed again, brows pinching together. His big hands slid up my sides and back down, making me shiver, wanting to feel him fully pressed against me. When he nodded, I exhaled in relief and reached for the nightstand again.

Theo's eyes were dark as he watched me pump lube onto my fingers and reach down. His eyelids fluttered when I slicked up his bare cock, his lips parting on a sharp gasp.

"Don't you—" He swallowed. "What about—"

I shook my head, dropping the tube and leaning down to kiss him again. "We don't need it. If you don't want it."

"I don't," he croaked immediately, gripping my hips harder. "I want to feel you."

Reaching down between our bodies again, I lifted my hips as I grasped his length and tilted it up until it notched against my hole, which was still relaxed from his fingers in the shower. Sitting up, I placed my hands on his stomach and tipped my head back in pleasure as I sank onto his cock. Once the hint of pain had faded and I relaxed enough to stop clenching so tight around him, I started to ride him slowly.

Theo gasped, eyes locked on where we were joined. His throat bobbed, gaze lifting to stare at me with pleading eyes. “A-Ari.”

I’d never seen him like this. This… supplicating. It made me want to look after him the way he looked after me. To protect him from everything bad in the world, to keep him safe and happy.

My thighs trembled as my hips rocked over him, sliding his cock in and out of me with as much care as he’d shown me in the shower. I didn’t know if he noticed, but he was suddenly gathering me into his arms and rolling me onto my back, sinking his cock back inside the moment he nestled between my thighs.

I gasped in pleasure, moaning against his mouth when he kissed me again, before he tucked his face into my neck and mumbled my name in a hoarse voice. His thrusts were slow and deep, but not forceful, like he already knew what I’d intended this to be.

This wasn’t about getting off. This was about showing him with my body just how much I loved him. How complete I felt when he was with me, inside me.

I tightened my arms around his shoulders and buried my face in his throat, breathing his scent in deeply as his hips moved against me, painstakingly slow.

If the thing that haunted me was the price of getting to have him, I’d pay it. Over and over.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SIX

Burning the flowers worked.

I didn't know how or why, but it worked. The thing hadn't come back for a week.

Theo kept trying to talk to me about it. I shut him down every time, saying I didn't want to discuss it. I was afraid that talking about it would bring it back.

I went to work, but it took me a few days to feel normal again. I caught Inaya glancing at me often with a worried expression, which forced me to try and act cheerful. Eventually, I stopped having to force it when every time I came home from work, nothing happened at the house. I saw no shadows. I heard no voices. No flowers appeared in the house. No monstrous demons infected my dreams, turning them into confusing, arousing nightmares. I slept peacefully every night.

It had stopped.

But something was wrong with Theo.

He was quiet and tense all the time. When we sat watching TV in the evenings, I could feel how stiff his muscles were every time I curled up into his side. His face was drawn, and he wasn't getting enough sleep. He stopped coming to bed with me, started getting up earlier, and started drinking more. One morning I came downstairs and found him passed out on the sofa, an almost empty bottle of whisky in front of him on the coffee table.

We hadn't had sex since the morning after he got home from his trip. He still kissed me often, and told me that he loved me, but his voice was always strangely pained when he said it.

I grew terrified that he really didn't. That he didn't love me anymore. That he wanted me gone, and he was just waiting for the time to tell me.

It was partly why I cut him off every time he tried to bring up that awful night. Flat out telling him no, loudly speaking over him to change the subject, asking Athena if she wanted to go for a walk so she started barking. If I ignored it, it would all go away, and we could get back to how we'd been before I'd told him anything.

Which was why, when he carefully tried to bring it up again over dinner, I slammed my glass down on the kitchen island as an uncharacteristic swell of rage rose inside me.

"Stop." I shoved my chair back, its legs squealing over the tiles. "Just stop, Theo. I don't want to talk about it."

"We have to talk about it," he said immediately, eyes growing hard as he quickly stood up while I turned to flee the room. "Ari, I have to tell you something."

Panic flared, making me walk quicker out of the kitchen. He was going to tell me I had to go. He was going to tell me he didn't want to be with me anymore.

"Ari, stop," he shouted, the hard crack of his voice making me jump. "I've see Hi—I've seen it too."

I froze, breathing hard as I stared at the gleaming white tiles. The cellar door was an ominous dark blot in my periphery, tucked beyond the staircase.

Slowly, I turned around to face Theo. "What?"

He was stiff, hands clenched into fists at his sides, lips pressed into a tight line. He gave me a curt nod, eyes darting to the cellar door.

"You've *seen* it?" I took a stilted step forward. "But you—you said you couldn't hear it down the phone when it was banging on the door."

"I couldn't. But I've seen it."

I couldn't work out which emotion was stronger. Anger that he hadn't told me, or relief that I wasn't insane. That I hadn't imagined it all.

"Wh-when?"

He shrugged stiffly, averting his eyes. "For a long time. Longer than I've known you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I snapped, wanting to stride up to him and shove his chest.

His eyes darted back to me, brows pinching. “How the fuck was I supposed to tell you that?”

“*What*?” I gave him, striding towards him and shoving my finger in his chest. “I *told* you, Theo. After our first night together. I fucking *told* you I’d seen something.”

He flinched, ducking his head. “I know,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—I didn’t want to scare you away by telling you what—what was here.”

That made me jolt, taking a step back as I stared at him. “H-here? It—You mean it—it didn’t follow *me* here? It… was already here?”

“Yes,” he said quietly.

It took me a few seconds to process that. When I finally did, fury exploded in a fiery rush.

“I’ve been seeing that thing for months—I’ve been *tormented* by it—and you didn’t fucking say anything?”

“I didn’t know,” he shouted, cheeks growing flushed with defensive anger. “You didn’t *tell* me, Ari. I thought you’d seen it that one time and then it stopped. You should’ve told me.”

“You still let me move in here,” I shouted back. “You knew it was here and you let me *live* here.”

Theo flinched again, the anger draining from him to be replaced by a look of pained guilt. I refused to let myself soften at the sight of it.

“I didn’t know He—it would show itself to you.” His voice shook. “It’s—attached to me. It’s never…”

My breath left me in a forceful rush as I stared at him. That thing… was attached to *Theo*? With a sickening jolt, I suddenly realised that every time I had seen it in my old flat… every time, it had been after Theo had been there. Like he’d brought it in with him.

“B-but it… When you weren’t here, it—”

“It’s attached to me,” he repeated, voice low and hoarse, his eyes averted, “but it… it lives in the cellar.”

I couldn’t react for a few moments, staring at him in utter shock. Before I could say anything, he made a pained sound and roughly scrubbed at his face.

“I need to tell you everything.” His voice was flat. “I’ve been trying to tell you since—I need you to listen, okay? Before you… before you react.”

Oh god. I sucked in a sharp breath and took a step back, wrapping my arms around my middle and digging my fingers into my sides until pain bloomed. I had no idea what he was going to tell me, but I already knew it would be bad.

"Okay," I whispered.

Theo exhaled sharply and dropped his hands, fingers curling repeatedly as he looked at me.

"I…" He let out a humourless snort of laughter and shook his head. "I don't even know where to fucking start. So I guess…" Taking another deep breath, he looked me dead in the eyes and said, "I was born in 1697."

All I could do was stare at him, frozen in place. Intense, gut-cramping worry for him began to creep in.

"I wasn't…" He cringed. "I wasn't a good man. I was selfish and power-hungry and materialistic. I wanted wealth. I wanted…" He gestured vaguely around us. "A big house and lots of money and I—I was terrified of dying. I didn't want to just be here and then gone, an insignificant speck in history, having achieved nothing."

1697, I was still replaying in my head. *He just said he was born in 1697.*

"I'd heard rumours of the Hellfire Club in London—that they worshipped demons—so I travelled there hoping they might know… I don't know what I was really hoping for. But it was all bullshit, anyway." He let out a derisive snort. "It was just a bunch of fat old men getting drunk and molesting women. They weren't demon-worshippers. They didn't need any help. They were already rich and powerful and above everyone else.

"But I was already obsessed with the idea of it by then," he continued, briefly meeting my gaze. "That I might be able to offer something that seemed so insignificant to me, not even real—my soul—in exchange for everything I'd ever wanted, in an instant. Wealth. Power. Immortality."

My stomach dropped as I stared at him, dread and worry tangling in my chest and making it hard to breathe.

"I started reading up on demonology. The occult. Trying to find mentions of a demon that would make pacts with humans, that would be willing to give me what I wanted. It took me almost ten years, but I… I eventually found Him."

The dread got worse when Theo sighed, his expression becoming almost… dreamy.

“I found Him,” he repeated, his voice filled with a perverse kind of reverence. “And He offered me everything I wanted in exchange for… tying myself to Him. Becoming His vessel.”

“Vessel,” I repeated at length in a whisper.

Theo nodded, gaze flitting to me and away again just as fast. “He… possesses me. He can only take over when I let Him, or sometimes if I’m—if I get distracted or… overwhelmed. But He—All of this”—he gestured around us again—“everything, it’s all because of Him. He gave me everything.”

I swallowed, trying to keep my voice steady as I asked, “Who’s ‘He’, Theo?”

He was watching me. “If I say His name, He’ll come.”

Licking my dry lips, I resisted the urge to take a step back. “Okay. And… where is He now?”

“In the cellar. I told you, He stays in the cellar. The room next to the wine cellar.”

I took a deep breath, trying not to freak out completely as I ran through everything he’d just said in my head.

Born in 1697.

Hellfire Club.

Demons.

Obsessed.

“Okay.” I tried to make my voice calm, but it still shook. I pushed my hair back from my flushed face, hot sweats breaking out all over me. “Okay. Theo, I think we… I think maybe we should get the house checked for a gas leak or something.”

His eyes darted to me, expression incredulous. “What?”

“I don’t think either of us are… thinking rationally. I think there’s something—”

“I’m thinking rationally,” he interrupted in a stilted voice. “I’m just telling you the truth. Trying to help you understand why you’ve been seeing Him. Why He’s here.”

God, this was fucking awful. I wasn’t worried about myself anymore. I was worried about Theo.

“Theo, you just said you were born in 1697,” I said gently.

He stared at me hard. “I was.”

Fuck.

“You said a demon lives in the cellar.”

His face went red. “He does.”

“Theo.” I softened my voice, stepping closer to place a gentle hand on his heaving chest. “This isn’t normal. What you’re—what we’re both saying. I think—”

“Are you fucking serious, Ari?” Theo looked angrier than I’d ever seen him as he stared down at me. “I said I fucking believed you. But when I try to explain it to you, your answer is to try and tell me I’m fucking *insane?* Or hallucinating?”

“Not just you,” I blurted, a stab of guilt making me step back. He was right. He’d told me straight away, both times, that he believed me. He hadn’t tried to make me feel crazy. He hadn’t tried to convince me I was seeing things.

But this wasn’t… this *couldn’t* be real.

“Not just you, Theo,” I repeated desperately as he jerked back. “I meant both of us—We—This could be like… carbon monoxide poisoning or black mould in the walls. Or”—I swallowed—“or shared psychosis.”

“*Folie a deux*,” he rasped, then let out a hard bark of laughter as he reached up to scrub roughly at his face. “It’s not that. But thanks.”

I swallowed, wrapping my arms around my middle. “I’m sorry,” I croaked. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just—There has to be a rational explanation for this, Theo. We can’t both be—”

“There is,” he interrupted, his voice painfully flat. “I just told you. He’s attached to me. To this house. I’m sorry you don’t believe me. I thought you’d—”

He cut himself off, rubbing his face again. I curled my fingers into my sides hard, pain flaring in my waist from the pressure.

My voice was wobbly when I said, “Theo—”

“You can take the car if you want,” he interrupted in a voice devoid of emotion. “If you don’t want to be here anymore. I can pay for a hotel until you find somewhere.”

I swallowed, eyes growing hot. “Are you—are you saying you don’t me here anymore?”

“No.” He said it immediately, but he wasn’t looking at me. “Never. I want you here. I want *you*. But I understand if this is too much. If you—I don’t know.” He shrugged stiffly. “If you think I’m insane, or that I’ve somehow made you believe you were seeing things.”

Guilt crushed me. “I don’t think that,” I rushed out desperately. “I don’t. I’m sorry, Theo. I—I believe you.”

Except, even after everything I’d experienced, I… didn’t. How could I? Theo had just told me he was over three hundred years old. That he’d made a pact with a demon. He thought he was… what, immortal?

My focus wasn’t on what had been happening to me over these past few months anymore. Hearing the level of Theo’s delusion was allowing me to think about it all more rationally. I was no longer trapped inside a swelling bubble of fear inside my own head. It was no longer a horrifying, lonely thing I was trying to deal with in secret. This was something affecting Theo, not just me.

“I believe that you’ve… seen it too,” I said, because it was the most I could say without lying to him. “We’ve both seen it. But I think that… I think we should maybe… speak to someone.”

Slowly, Theo looked at me. His eyes were incredulous. “So you *don’t* believe me.”

“I—” I rubbed my hot face, taking a step back. “I’m trying, Theo, but you—you just told me you were over three hundred years old. You said you were forty-one.”

“I am.” He went pink. “I mean, I was when I made the pact with Him. When I stopped aging.”

Jesus. Okay, I knew I had to tread very carefully here. I parted my lips to speak, but Theo beat me to it.

“I understand the need to try and rationalise this,” he said, watching me. “But I told you, Ari, there were things you shouldn’t mess with. I was speaking from experience. I’m telling the truth. I’m not crazy.”

“I know you’re not,” I said as calmly as I could, repeating the words he’d said to me when I’d told him the very same thing.

But in that moment, I didn’t mean it.

“You’ve seen the mark on my back. His mark.”

I blinked rapidly, picturing that thumbprint birthmark on his lower back.

“You’ve seen *Him*,” he continued, his voice rough. “You saw Him. In the cellar. You told me.”

My breath caught. I looked away quickly, not wanting to acknowledge what I saw in Theo’s eyes.

When I didn’t say anything, Theo burst out, “The flowers. You can’t explain those away. They were everywhere. You followed them in the

cellar. You saw them burning after I cleaned them up."

My head was starting to hurt. It felt strange, almost a betrayal, to be trying to explain everything away now, when I'd been so desperate for him to believe me just days ago.

But that was before Theo had told me he was a demon-worshipping immortal man born over three hundred years ago.

We were both imagining things. That had to be the answer. I'd babbled about the flowers on the phone, before he'd got home. Maybe I'd… maybe I'd implanted the idea in his mind, and he *thought* he'd seen them too. Maybe that bonfire had been nothing more than leaves and branches.

I bit my lip hard, trying to hold back a sob at the thought of Theo imagining that he was picking up flowers from the floor and carrying them outside, setting them on fire. Imagining that he'd been born centuries ago and made a pact with a demon.

"And the—the lilies," Theo continued desperately. "He hates them. He ruined them because you brought them into the house."

Fuck, now I was picturing Theo creeping downstairs in the middle of the night and throwing that fucking vase of lilies on the floor, thinking he had to because his *demon* hated them.

"You saw Him, Ari." Theo's voice broke. "You told me you saw Him in your room after our first date. You have to believe me."

I felt like a terrible person for *not* believing him, when he'd so readily said he believed *me*.

I had no idea what to do. How to deal with this.

"I—I think we…" I rubbed my face. "I think we both need to calm down."

"I'm calm," Theo said quietly, watching me with a pained frown.

"Why don't we—Let's go somewhere. Out of the house for a while," I said desperately, stepping forward to tangle my clammy fingers through his.

He shook his head, pulling his hand free to take a step back. "I need a cigarette."

He brushed past me, heading for the sitting room. I turned and watched him, worry churning in my stomach, making me feel sick.

I heard the scrabble of Athena's claws on the tiles as she got up to follow Theo outside when he unlocked the back door, then the faint click of a lighter, followed by a long, weary exhale from Theo.

After a few minutes of just standing in the front hall, I slowly walked through the sitting room to step outside. He was sitting on the edge of one of the sun loungers by the pool, elbows resting on his knees as he stared down at the ground and brought the cigarette to his lips.

I hesitantly sat down beside him, reaching over to rest my hand on his thigh. He tensed at the contact, which made my lips pull down with sorrow.

"We—We'll figure this out," I told him. He shook his head, not looking at me.

"There's nothing to figure out. I tied myself to Him willingly a long time ago, and that's it."

God, I had no fucking idea how to answer that.

Theo exhaled heavily, then took a long drag of his cigarette, the end crackling and flaring brighter. "I spoke to Him. After I got back."

When I didn't say anything, he sighed again and leaned down to stub his cigarette out on the patio before continuing.

"I wanted to know why He'd been showing Himself to you. He's never… never shown Himself to anyone else before."

Was that a hint of jealousy in his voice?

He turned his head to look at me, and my gut clenched at the sight of his glassy eyes.

"He said He… wants you, Ari. He said He's not going to leave you alone. And I—" He rubbed his face, mouth trembling. "I thought I'd be able to keep you separate from it all. I didn't know He'd… I didn't mean for you to get caught up in this. I'm sorry, Ari." He made a pained noise. "I'm sorry."

Chest aching, I stood up to sit back down sideways on his lap, cradling his head. He wrapped his arms around me tightly, burying his face in my throat.

"It's okay," I whispered, staring through the windows into the softly lit sitting room. "We'll figure it out."

My poor Theo. He needed help.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN

We didn't speak much for the rest of the night. Theo was withdrawn and tense, and when I went to bed he didn't come up for a long time. I was still awake when he eventually slipped under the sheets, and his skin felt ice cold as my foot brushed against him.

I lay on my side, staring into the darkness. Wondering what he'd been doing.

The next morning, he drove me to work and told me vacantly that he was going to be at his office in town all day. So the moment I stepped into the florist shop, I asked Inaya if I could book the afternoon off.

I was going to try and sort this out.

I didn't text Theo all morning. Every free moment I had, I researched possible causes for whatever was happening. I read that electromagnetic fields could affect people in weird ways. Maybe the wiring in the house was faulty or something. I looked up symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning and black mould. I thought about that room in the cellar, the one he'd told me had mould in it. If he'd been going down there, thinking a demon lived in there, it had surely been affecting him. And it was an old house. It could be in the walls.

I had a short list of businesses to call by the time I got a cab home just after lunch. I wanted to try and get someone out today to look at the house, so that I had a logical solution for Theo by the time he got home.

But Theo's car was already in the drive when the cab dropped me off.

He'd probably just come home for lunch or to see Athena, but when I opened the front door cautiously, I couldn't hear him anywhere in the

house. The back door was open, but I could see Athena outside on the grass gnawing on her tennis ball. When I walked through the sitting room and poked my head outside, Theo wasn't out there.

The house was completely silent as I slowly walked back to the front hall. I stopped, straining my ears to try and hear him upstairs. Maybe he was taking a nap. He hadn't been sleeping well.

I headed for the staircase, but froze with my foot on the bottom step, my eyes landing on the cellar door.

The padlock was gone.

I stepped back and stared at the door for a long time. No sounds came from beyond it, but I remembered how muffled everything was down there, how the thick silence pressed against your eardrums. Like you were deep in the earth, small and alone.

Slipping my bag off my shoulder, I slowly set it on the ground and walked unsteadily to the door. It didn't creak when I pulled it open and stared at the closed door at the bottom of the staircase. The air tingled, static making the hair on my arms stand up.

What was Theo doing down there? I couldn't hear the clink of bottles in the wine cellar, if he'd gone down to get some wine. But why would he have been getting wine in the middle of the day? My gut clenched with worry. He'd been drinking more and more the past week. Maybe he was trying to self-medicate. Trying to deal with his delusion because I'd made it worse by telling him I shared it.

I walked slowly down the stairs and paused outside the door. I could tell no one was in there. The room felt empty on the other side.

Which meant he had to be in the other room. The one he'd said was mouldy and damp, the one that had somehow seemed to go on for miles when I was down here. I remembered the thick moisture on the stone walls. The steam in the air. God, he shouldn't be in there.

Tugging my shirt up to cover my nose and mouth, I pushed open the door and stepped into the wine cellar. The light was on and the fridges hummed softly, the air cool in here.

The pile of flowers was gone, and so was the trail of them that led to the other door down here, but my gaze swung that way anyway. As I hesitantly approached it, I realised I could hear muffled mumbling coming from behind it.

The worry in my gut turned to despair. I pictured Theo just beyond that door, delusional and hallucinating, talking to himself, thinking he was talking to a demon. He shouldn't be down here.

When I lifted the latch and pulled open the door, keeping my shirt tightly over my nose and mouth, I blinked at the soft glow that filled the small room. Candles were everywhere, their flames flickering and sputtering from the hot steam that filled the air, making it hazy. I could feel warm moisture clinging to my skin and clothes already, and as I took a hesitant step inside, my gaze was drawn to the right by movement at the corner of my eye.

I couldn't work out what I was seeing at first.

Theo was kneeling before an altar of some kind. He was naked, but his skin looked darker than normal, like he was coated in something. His hair hung limply over his shoulders and down his back in wet clumps as he tipped his head towards the ceiling.

There was a dagger in his right hand, clasped in a loose fist against his thigh. Its blade was coated in something dark, dripping onto Theo's skin. When the candlelight flickered over it and let me see its deep red-black sheen, I realised what it was.

Blood.

My horrified eyes darted back to Theo. He was coated in blood, thick rivulets dripping down his back, plastering his hair to his skull. When a fat droplet splashed onto his shoulder from above, my eyes swung up before I could stop them.

Then I was screaming.

There was a body suspended from the ceiling. Naked, skin already grey, their eyes open and unseeing as their blood poured from a long slit across their throat, directly onto Theo beneath them.

It was just hanging there, its limbs dangling in a sickening way that made my gorge rise. I couldn't see chains or anything that would keep it suspended, but it was *just hanging there*. As the screams started pouring from my mouth, a familiar, hideous face appeared in the shadows above the altar.

Wide, unblinking eyes with white pupils that gleamed in the candlelight. The horrifying grin stretching its mouth, until it grew even wider, and wider, its mouth gaping open into an impossible void.

Huge, clawed hands shot out of the shadows and curled around the corpse's dangling legs. Skin rasped over stone as the body was yanked back along the ceiling, directly into that gaping maw, getting gobbled up in seconds until there was nothing left. Bone crunched and blood poured over the altar, extinguishing some of the candles, which were already streaming out black smoke.

Then that grinning face looked at me.

"*Ari*," it said, audible in my head over the screams that wouldn't stop scraping from my throat.

Theo had jerked around at the sound, scrambling to his feet. Blood dripped from him, his blue beard streaked with it, eyes dark, burning holes in his coated face.

"Ari," he said shakily, reaching for me. I stumbled back.

"Oh m-my g-god." I turned to run, almost tripping. "Oh my god. Oh my god."

"Ari," I heard him say again as I raced through the wine cellar and up the stairs. He pounded up the stairs behind me, feet slapping wetly on the stone, making terror streak through me and white out my vision.

My foot skidded on the tiles as I ran for the front door, my heart pounding frantically in my chest, eyes blurry with hot tears.

"Ari, please stop," Theo grated, his voice harsh and tinged with desperation. "Please let me explain."

I was shaking so hard I couldn't grip the door handle at first. I fumbled with it until I managed to pull it open, then shouted in terror when the door was ripped from my hand by an unseen force, slamming shut. I whirled round to stare at Theo through tear-blurred eyes.

"Stop it," I shouted, hands clenching into fists at my sides. "Don't."

He raised his hands, palms out, throat bobbing. Bloody footprints marred the white tiles behind him. "It's not me, Ari. He doesn't want you to go."

"Stop it, Theo," I shouted, my voice shaky with fear. "There's no one else *here*."

"There is." I saw Theo's throat bob again behind the blood-streaked cobalt beard. "You know there is. You've seen Him. You just saw Him."

"I j-just s-saw you *m-murdering* someone." I let out a sob and ran for the sitting room, towards the wide-open doors to freedom. I had to get away from him, from this house.

They didn't slam shut on their own this time. My foot caught on the threshold in my haste, sending me tumbling onto the patio, scraping my hands and banging my knee hard. I didn't let it slow me down, scrambling back up and racing for the steps that led to the grass.

"Ari," Theo shouted from behind me. "Stop. Please."

I ignored him, my chest heaving as I ran as fast as I could across the lawn, heading directly towards the forest behind Theo's house. *Have to get away. Have to get away.*

"You can't just run off," he shouted. I could hear his footsteps pounding on the grass as he chased me. "It's not safe."

Hysterical laughter bubbled up my throat, but it turned into a raw scream when Theo's bloody hand wrapped around my wrist and jerked me to a stop. I fought wildly to get away, trying to yank my arm free, scratching at his skin.

"Please," he begged in a hoarse voice. "Please, Ari, just let me explain. I'd never hurt you. You know I'd never hurt you."

"I just saw you *killing* someone," I shouted, whirling round to face him. The blood coating him gleamed crimson in the sun. The sickening metallic scent of it stung my nostrils.

"Yes, for Him," he said desperately. "I have to for Him."

"There's no *demon*, Theo," I shouted, even though I'd just seen it. I'd just seen it *eating* a person. "There's something wrong with you—with both of us. Something's making us think—"

"There's nothing wrong with either of us, Ari." Theo's voice grew angry, frustrated. "He's real. You just fucking *saw* Him."

"N-no." I was trembling wildly, staring at the blood staining my shirt sleeve from Theo's hand. "Th-there's—This is shared psychosis. Or something in the house—a gas leak or mould in the cellar—"

"It's not a gas leak, Ari," Theo barked. "Neither of us is hallucinating. It's not shared psychosis. I've been tied to Him longer than you've been alive."

Rage flared, drowning out some of the terror.

"You're not three hundred fucking years old, Theo," I shouted, my voice raw. "You're not immortal. You're a murderer who's convinced yourself that you need to do this for some—that you're doing this for a *demon*."

“Yes, I am a murderer,” he said tightly. Black spots danced in my vision, hearing him admit it so freely. “I’ve killed a lot of people, Ari. But they’ve all been for Him. I have to, because of my pact with Him. He—He needs sacrifices to—”

“Are you *listening* to yourself, Theo?” Hot tears streamed from my eyes, blurring his naked, blood-streaked outline. “You need help.”

“Stop trying to tell me I’m crazy, Ari,” Theo shouted, making me flinch in terror.

All the anger drained from him in an instant, expression growing pained at the sight of my fear. His bare chest rose quickly with his fast breaths, the dark hair there matted with blood.

“I’m not crazy, Ari,” he said, trying to make his voice steady, but it still shook. “I’m so sorry you’ve gotten caught up in this. I never wanted you to…” He swallowed, then croaked, “You know I’d never hurt you, dimples.”

I was breathing hard, my eyes fixed on his chest until I slowly lifted them to stare at him. His eyes were uncharacteristically desperate as he gazed back at me. Pleading with me.

I didn’t flinch again when he lifted a trembling hand and cupped my face, even though I could feel the sticky wetness of the blood coating nearly every inch of him.

Shouldn’t that have bothered me? Was I in shock? I didn’t feel like I was, but I knew I had to be.

If anything, it felt more like my mind was being brought into sharp clarity after months of fears that I was being haunted or that something was wrong with me.

Maybe I’d picked up on things. Things Theo was doing that I didn’t want to acknowledge, so I’d created an impossible scenario to explain them in some other way. To stop myself from realising what he really was.

A killer.

And maybe it made me laughably naïve and stupid, but I *did* know that Theo would never hurt me. I’d never even considered the possibility. I’d never felt scared of *him*—even now, after what I’d just seen. Even when he was standing in front of me, naked and coated in someone else’s blood from head to toe.

Seeing the stark reality of what had really been happening here was filling me with a strange, calming sense of relief.

He looked like some ancient wild god, with his long bloody hair framing his face in wet clumps. The crimson-streaked blue beard and piercings flashing in his tanned face. His powerful body, naked and smeared with blood in the sunlight.

A sick, alien part of me wanted to fall to my knees and *worship* him like this.

"I know," I whispered, resisting the urge to turn my face into his hand and kiss his palm. It was completely coated in blood.

Why wasn't I more disgusted by that? More *worried*?

The air left Theo's lungs in a relieved rush, like he'd been holding his breath while he waited for my answer.

"I know this is… this is hard to understand. I know it probably sickens you. But it's what I have to do." He was gazing down at me, trying to make me understand.

I took a deep breath, my gorge rising when the scent and taste of blood filled my mouth.

"I understand," I said unsteadily, because I understood it was what he *thought* he had to do. Briefly closing my eyes, I took another breath. "I'm not—I'm not going to tell anyone. I w-want to help you, Theo."

He froze, dropping his hand from my cheek. "What do you mean?"

"I love you," I told him desperately. My mind was already racing. How had he not been caught yet? How long until he *got* caught? How could I help him stop whatever compulsion drove him to kill people? "Maybe we can—We can find someone for you to talk to. Anger management, or…"

When I trailed off, he huffed and scrubbed roughly at his face, smearing blood everywhere. "For fuck's sake, Ari."

"I'm trying to think of a way to *help* you," I shouted, following him as he turned and strode back towards the house. "To stop whatever it is that… makes you need to do this. I don't want you to go to prison, Theo. I don't want you to fucking *murder* people."

"I don't have an anger problem," he said stiffly as he walked onto the patio and towards a packet of cigarettes I could see resting on a sun lounger. My gut roiled when I pictured him out here completing some sick, pre-murder smoke ritual before heading inside to slit a stranger's throat in the cellar.

"I don't have any murderous compulsions," he continued, fumbling with the packet and pulling out a cigarette, smearing it in blood. "I don't go

into psychotic rages where I can't control myself. I don't lie next to you in bed fantasising about killing people. It's just what I have to do. For Him."

How could he sound so *calm* when talking about killing people? Was it because he'd really convinced himself that it was truly something he had to do for a demon?

He lit his cigarette and took a deep drag, expelling the smoke noisily as he whirled round to face me.

"I don't understand how you can *still* be denying what's really happening here." He gestured at the house, and my eyes caught our reflections in the window.

I looked so small next to his towering nude frame, pale against his tanned, crimson-streaked skin. My eyes were big burning holes in my face, cheek smeared in blood.

I looked like a… like a lost nymph that had been lured to a hungry monster's sacrificial altar.

"You've seen Him," Theo continued roughly. "Several times, Ari. You've *heard* Him. You just saw a fucking… body hanging from the ceiling by nothing. You *saw* Him consume them."

Oh god. I sat down heavily on the top step of the patio, my vision wavering as I remembered what I'd just witnessed in the cellar. That lifeless, pale body hanging limply above Theo's head, raining blood onto him. White eyes and sharp teeth, claws snatching to drag the corpse into its waiting mouth.

"H-how…" I pressed my hand to my forehead, my skin burning under the hot sun beating down on us. "How is this possible?"

"Demons exist," Theo said flatly. "And I tied myself to one. Willingly."

I shuddered, growing horrified at the possibility of a *demon* stalking me for months. And if it was even remotely true…

"Why?" I asked in a hard voice, lifting my head to look at him. "Why would you do that?"

Theo shrugged stiffly, looking ashamed as he averted his eyes. "I told you last night. Greed. Money. Power. It wasn't for any noble reason."

I stared at a big bush of hydrangea, its delicate cream flowers almost translucent in the sun, then let out a hard bark of humourless laughter. "Okay. Say I believe you—"

Theo's jaw clenched, but he didn't say anything.

"—why do you have to kill people for Him?"

“It’s His payment. For what He’s given me. Still gives me.” Theo took a hesitant step closer. “Sacrifices in His name give Him power. It makes Him stronger for a while, until He demands another.”

“So you…” I stared down at my hands resting on my knees, unable to believe that I was talking to Theo about the people he murdered. “You just find random people to bring here and kill.”

“No. He finds them. He picks them. And they’re not…” Theo shifted uncomfortably. “They’re not always random.”

Slowly, I lifted my head to stare up at him. He wasn’t looking at me, his head bowed as he took a long drag of his cigarette.

“What does that mean, Theo?”

He swallowed, flicking his cigarette butt away before kneeling beside me on the patio and gazing at me with imploring eyes. “Ari, you have to… you have to understand that it’s not *me* who picks them. I have no control over it. And once He’s picked someone, it’s like… it’s like pressure in my skull. He doesn’t let up until I’ve done it. Until He has them.”

Fuck. Fuck. Who had he killed? I sucked in a panicked breath, trying to remember the last time I’d heard from Edel. They’d been texting me all week but I hadn’t responded, not wanting to talk about that awful weekend.

I relaxed slightly when I remembered I’d heard from them this morning, when they texted me yet again asking if anything was wrong.

“What did you do, Theo?” I asked in a hard voice.

His throat bobbed, but he held my gaze. “I—I was married. A long time ago, in the late 1700s. And He… He… picked her.”

The blood drained from my face. I stared back at him. “You killed your wife?”

“I had to,” he burst out, shuffling closer, leaving smears of blood on the patio. “He picked her, Ari. I can’t—The only way to make it stop once He picks someone is to… do it.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Suddenly I was doubting my own self-preservation instincts. Theo had *killed his wife.* How could I assume that he wouldn’t ever hurt *me?*

And then it got so much worse.

“He did it again when I remarried,” Theo mumbled, looking down at his hands. “He picked every person I ever had any kind of relationship with, so eventually I just stopped having them. And then…” He swallowed and looked up at me, dark eyes burning. “I met you.”

Before I could even react to that, Theo blurted, “But He doesn’t want to hurt you, Ari. He said He… He wants to protect you.” He cleared his throat, a mix of emotions flitting across his face. “He said He wants you.”

I choked on a breath, my heart racing. What the fuck did that mean? Was that Theo’s way of telling me he wasn’t going to kill me? Saying his *demon* wanted me?

“F-fuck.” I gulped in breaths, my throat aching as my mouth started to tremble. “I just… fell in love with you,” I said tearfully, rubbing at my eyes. “I don’t—I don’t know how to deal with this.”

Theo’s face creased in pain. “I don’t either,” he croaked, shuffling closer to me. “I fell in love with you too. I just wanted to be with you.”

A confusing tangle of unimaginable happiness and anger tightened my insides, like delicate flowers blooming between sharp thorns.

“But you knew this would happen,” I shot back. “You *knew*.”

“No.” His voice was uncharacteristically pleading. “I thought He—I thought He would leave you alone. I thought He’d let me have you. He said I could. I thought He’d show me mercy.”

“*Can* He?” I snapped, no longer sure if I was referring to Theo’s delusion or if I was really starting to believe him.

Theo sat back on his heels, reaching up to rub anxiously at his face. “Sometimes,” he mumbled.

“So you were—” I gulped, tiny hiccupping sobs hitching my chest. “You were prepared to *murder* me if He didn’t?”

“*No*,” Theo said desperately, shuffling closer to me again, his eyes pleading. “No, Ari.”

“But you just said—you just said you have to, when He picks someone. That it’s the only way to make it stop. What if He’d picked me?”

He shook his head, brows pinched. “It is, but I never—I would never hurt you. I’d kill myself before hurting you.”

“Why?” I blubbered, curling away from him. “Why me? What makes me different to all the others?”

“Because I love you,” he told me desperately. “I didn’t love any of them. I didn’t even *know* most of them. But I love you, Ari. More than anything.”

“You said He—You—Your wives.”

“I didn’t love them, Ari,” he repeated quietly, hand twitching with the urge to touch me, but he refrained. “But I love you.”

“Wh-what about at the b-beginning?” I stuttered through tears. “You couldn’t have loved me then. What if He told you to do it then? W-would you have?”

“No.” Theo’s voice shook. “And I didn’t—I wanted you so much, the first moment I saw you. I knew you were—I knew there was something different.” He sat back on his heels again and rubbed his face. “I tried to stay away from you, but I couldn’t.”

“You should have,” I snapped, and he flinched, hanging his head. “You should have, because now I love you and the thought of not being with you is—” I choked on a weak sob, trembling fingers scrubbing the tears roughly from my cheeks. “What am I supposed to do?”

Theo was silent for a long time until he croaked, “I don’t know.”

I tried to stop crying as we sat in silence. Athena wandered over, wagging her tail and snuffling at my hand before giving it a lick. I stroked her head automatically. She didn’t seem at all bothered by the sight of her owner coated in blood.

She’s probably used to it, I thought with a touch of hysteria.

I felt numb when Theo eventually said, “You can take the car if you don’t want to stay here. I’ll find you somewhere. I’ll help you, I promise. Whatever you need.” His voice broke. “B-but He… I don’t know what He’ll do, Ari. He wants you. He’s… not used to not getting what He wants.”

“What does that even mean?” My voice was hollow.

I saw Theo flinch from the corner of my eye, but I kept staring vacantly at the lawn. At nothing.

“I’m not sure,” he said shakily. “He said He… wants you the way I do.”

Before I could stop it, I was remembering that horrible dream. The shocking arousal that had surged in me as He—that thing—stretched out on top of me. The rasp of fur and claws against my skin. The hot, chuffing breaths on my neck. How I’d tried to pull Him closer, how I’d tipped my head back to bare my vulnerable throat to Him.

I stood up abruptly, making Theo tense as Athena cocked her head, tail wagging harder.

“I need to take a shower,” I heard myself say, emotionless. “You should take one too.”

I turned and walked into the house without waiting for him to answer.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT

The anger set in later, after Theo and I had showered separately to get rid of all the blood.

And despair. Grief. Horror. I wasn't sure what it was I was feeling, but I couldn't bring myself to look at him.

He wasn't the man I'd thought he was. He wasn't perfect. He was the opposite. He wasn't good and kind and generous… except he *was*. He *was* all those things, and that was what confused me the most. How could he be so wonderful, and a monster at the same time?

The mind-blowing sex, the amazing food, the loyal dog, this idyllic house—it suddenly all felt like a carefully crafted illusion designed to cover up the rot festering at the core of everything. The death. The blood. The seedy underbelly steeped in horror, in some of the most abhorrent things a person could do.

I used the guest bathroom and stayed under the shower for a long time, scrubbing frantically at my face, keeping my eyes and mouth tightly closed so no blood got in them. By the time I stepped into the hallway, the main bathroom door was open, steam curling out, and I could hear Theo downstairs.

Relieved I wouldn't have to see him, I slipped into the bedroom. As I dried off, I stared vacantly at the bed. I'd been sleeping next to a murderer every night for months. A serial killer.

I'd finally caved a while back and put all my clothes away in drawers. After pulling one open and grabbing a pair of pyjamas, I froze, staring down at the silky material in my hands.

Was I staying, then? Could I actually stay here with him, knowing what he'd done? I didn't really know how to process the fact that my overriding emotion was intense worry for Theo. Not disgust. Not hate. I didn't hate him. I loved him, more than I'd ever loved anyone—I couldn't just turn that off. It couldn't just go away in an instant.

He was ill. He needed help. He believed he was possessed by a demon that was telling him to murder people. Maybe it was mental illness, or maybe it was something in the house making us both see things. Either way, he'd killed someone. I'd seen it.

I blinked rapidly when the dead-eyed, drained face of the corpse flashed in my mind. The white skin and blue lips. The gaping neck wound. The blood pouring down.

Twisting round from the dresser, I hurriedly tugged on my pyjamas, trying to get rid of the image. My palms stung as I shoved my wet hair back into a bun, scraped from the patio when I'd tripped in my desperate haste to get away from Theo. My knee was sore from where I'd landed on it hard, and felt hot and swollen.

I grabbed my phone before leaving the bedroom, stopping when the screen lit up and I saw dozens of missed calls. Seven from Edel and another five from Amir. Even one from my mother, which meant Edel had probably called her when they couldn't get hold of me.

There were several texts as well, but I couldn't bring myself to open any of them. I felt drained. Numb. I walked quietly down the stairs and paused at the bottom, staring into the front hall.

All the bloody footprints were gone. The sharp tang of bleach filled the air. My head swinging round, I saw the cellar door firmly closed, the padlock back in place.

Theo was in the kitchen. I could hear the tap running, the sound of him moving, the click of Athena's claws on the tiles as she followed him around. So I turned and walked in the opposite direction, through the library to the winter garden.

It was only mid-afternoon, the sky still a bright blue outside, the air too warm in here from the sun beating down on the glass roof. I couldn't believe it had only been a couple of hours at the most since I got home from work, determined to find some logical reason for why we were both seeing things that weren't real.

Instead, I'd found Theo murdering someone.

I sat down on the sofa and stared at nothing, slumped there like a puppet whose strings had been cut. I didn't move until a figure appeared at the open door, terror stabbing through me until I lifted my gaze and saw that it was Theo.

He took a single hesitant step inside and stopped. Clearing his throat, he rasped, "I—I'm going to take Athena for a walk. Do you… want to come?"

Like everything was normal, I heard myself say, "I won't today. My—my knee hurts from where I banged it outside."

That made Theo rush forward. He reached out when he stopped in front of me, then dropped his hand again. Adam's apple bobbing, he knelt beside the sofa without touching me.

"Can I see?" he asked quietly. "Do you… Is it alright if I touch you?"

I stared at him for a few seconds in silence, then slowly nodded.

"Which one?"

Wordlessly, I reached down and started tugging up my right pyjama leg. Theo took over, and I watched his hands being so careful with me, his warm fingertips brushing my calf as he rucked up the fabric.

He made a pained sound when he uncovered my knee, which was red and swollen. "I'll get you an ice pack to take the swelling down."

His gaze drifted over to my hand, which was resting limply on my thigh, palm upturned, exposing the grazes from my fall.

"Oh, Ari." His fingers were achingly gentle as he skimmed them over the edges of the graze. He stared down at my hand cradled in his, then choked out, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say.

Theo kept his head bent, thumbs rubbing softly against my inner wrist.

"I'm sorry," he repeated in a whisper. "I'm sorry I scared you. I didn't—I didn't think you'd come home. I didn't want you to see any of it."

I stayed silent. How was I supposed to answer that? It wasn't like I could tell him it was fine that he'd tried to ensure I'd be out of the house when he committed murder. So I wouldn't have to *see* it. So I could continue living in ignorance, in love with a man who killed people.

I felt betrayed, I realised. Calm, cold fury started rising up inside me.

"So if I'd never found out, and we stayed together," I began, voice trembling with suppressed anger, "you were just going to hide this from me forever? Be the perfect, loving partner while you murdered people in secret?"

Theo lifted his head. His lips opened and closed wordlessly, like he didn't know how to answer.

"And you're *immortal*, right?" I sneered the word, ignoring the way his jaw clenched. "So how were you going to explain that? When I'm an old man and you still look like this? Exactly the same. Never aging."

"I… I knew I'd need to tell you eventually," he said, voice low and hesitant. "But I… Before you, I never cared enough about anyone else to want to be with them forever. So I've never really… considered the implications."

I stared at him incredulously. "You said you were married. More than once."

Theo flushed, looking away. "It sounds harsh now, but… people didn't really live long back then."

Back then. I shoved down the hysterical laughter that teased the back of my throat.

Theo exhaled. His eyes sparked with dread when he looked back at me, like he really didn't want to say what he was about to.

"I haven't been a good man, Ari. I was selfish for most of my life. Cruel. I didn't care about other people or how my actions affected them." He gave a tiny, helpless shrug. "And it was just what people did in those days. You were expected to get married. Have children."

Unease soured my stomach. "Do you… do you have children?"

He shook his head. "No. I never had any children."

We were silent for a few minutes, Theo's big hands still cradling one of mine as he knelt in front of me.

Eventually, I heard myself whisper, "Why me?"

He looked up at me, brows drawn in a pained frown. "What do you mean?"

"You said you never loved any of them. You didn't care about anyone else. B-but you—you seem to care about me. You've never been selfish or cruel with me."

Slowly, Theo sat back on his heels, hands releasing mine to lightly grip my calves. "Why does anyone fall in love with anyone? The first time I went to that coffee shop and saw you through the florist window, I just… You stopped me dead in my tracks. I couldn't stop staring at you. I just… wanted you. So much."

My mouth trembled. I remembered feeling that way too. Seeing him for weeks, desperately wanting to speak with him, instantly feeling the pull. Something had drawn me to him, something very real and human—not paranormal. Just some natural instinct telling me, *That one. He's yours.*

"But like I said, I'd stopped having relationships because He—He didn't seem to like it," Theo continued tentatively. "I tried to stop going there to catch glimpses of you. I knew it would be safer. But I couldn't." He shook his head, mouth twisting with self-loathing. "I told you I was selfish. And then that day you walked past me—when you were so close I could have reached out and touched you… I just couldn't help myself. I had to talk to you."

I licked my dry lips, forcing myself to meet his gaze. "So it wasn't… it wasn't your demon telling you to talk to me?"

That was what I wanted to know. *Needed* to know. Had he seen me and picked me as his next target? His next victim? Had his "demon" told him to speak to me, to lure me in?

Theo shook his head, holding my gaze. "No. It was me. Just me." He swallowed, brows pinched. "It's always just been me, Ari."

My eyes filled with hot tears. I couldn't bring myself to speak, and when I stayed silent, Theo sighed quietly and stood, his knees cracking.

"I'll get you some ice for your knee."

He left the room, and I sat there staring at nothing again until he came back. He set an ice bag on the seat beside me then straightened, hesitating.

"I'll take Athena now." When I didn't say anything, he cleared his throat and continued hoarsely, "If you're gone when I get back, I understand. There's some money in my bedside drawer. Please take all of it. Take anything. Whatever you want. Keep the car. Don't worry about—"

He cut himself off and rubbed his face. I didn't move, didn't look up at him, just sucked in tiny, shallow breaths.

"But if you are gone…" I saw Theo's fingers twitch in my periphery, and his voice was filled with sorrow when he continued, "If you are gone, please know that I love you more than I knew possible. More than I knew I was capable of. You make me want to be better. And I hope you—I hope you're able to have a good life after this, and you find someone else who will love you just as much."

I bit down hard on my lower lip, chin trembling as tears streamed silently down my cheeks.

“I’ll do everything in my power to make Him leave you alone,” Theo continued, voice shaking. “I promise, Ari. Even if it means—” He stopped abruptly, shoving back his hair. “I said I’ll keep you safe, and I will. It doesn’t matter if it’s from a distance.”

I heard him swallow as he took a step back, then another. My limbs tensed. Part of me wanted to reach out and cling to him, to not let him leave. The other part still couldn’t move, didn’t know what it wanted, didn’t know if I could even bring myself to touch him.

“I love you, dimples,” he said, his voice wobbling, before turning to leave.

I swallowed a sob, finally lifting my gaze, but he was already gone.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE

At some point, I lay down and pulled the blanket over me after resting the ice pack on my knee, unable to move any more than that.

The house was silent, Theo and Athena gone. The sun was dipping in the sky, casting shadows across the tiles. I stared vacantly at the frondy shadow of a big parlour palm. At least I'd finally stopped crying. It felt like I'd been crying for days.

The sound of car tyres crunching over gravel made me jump violently. I slowly sat up, then stood and walked to the front windows to try and see the driveway.

My gut clenched when I saw the police car coming to a stop on the drive. No one got out for a minute, and when the passenger door eventually opened and a tall, dark-haired officer climbed out of the car, I jerked back from the windows before she could see me.

What the fuck? I chewed on my thumbnail, panicking, eyes darting to the door. Why were they here? Had… had Theo called them?

Oh god. Was Theo turning himself in? Was he trying to… I don't know, atone for what he'd done? Make things right?

Dread pierced my chest, making it hard to breathe. I jumped again when the doorbell rang, sucking in a panicked breath.

Theo wasn't here. Realising I had to answer, I started walking on shaky legs to the front hall. I pictured Theo getting taken away in handcuffs. Getting sent to prison for the rest of his life. God. No. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't—He was ill. He needed help. I couldn't bear the thought of him rotting in a prison cell forever.

I was trembling finely when I reached the front door. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm down. Maybe I could get rid of them before he got back.

But as I opened the door and stared at the two officers standing there, eyeing me, I suddenly realised how fucked up my thoughts were. I was going to try and *stop* Theo going to prison? Where he could never hurt anyone else? Shouldn't I want to stop him *killing* people, not protect him?

"Ari Sheppard?" the dark-haired officer asked, her eyes unreadable as she watched me.

I fixed a faint, confused smile on my face and said, "Yes. Can I help you?"

The two officers shared a look, before the other one with short ginger hair cleared his throat.

"We're just stopping by to do a welfare check," he said steadily, watching me closely. "Your friend is very worried about you. Said they haven't heard from you in a while despite repeated attempts to get in touch."

I blinked at them. What? Did the police really bother to do that? Follow up on someone—I knew it had to have been Edel—saying they hadn't heard from a person for only a week?

But then, as I heard the scrabble of claws behind me and the two officers' gazes shifted over my shoulder, growing hard and flinty, I realised why.

Because of Theo. Because Theo was already on their radar, having been suspected of something bad when his business associate vanished.

And suddenly, I knew. I knew he'd done it. He'd killed that person. That arsehole police officer who'd stopped me in town had been right.

I could tell them, I realised, as I stared at them and they stared at Theo somewhere behind me. I could tell them everything—I could tell them to look downstairs in the cellar. Surely they'd be able to find traces of blood. *Something*. The body had to still be down there, right? It hadn't *actually* been eaten by a demon. It couldn't have been.

Instead, I heard myself letting out a tinkling laugh and saying, "Oh, right. No, I'm—I've just been busy."

I could feel Theo watching me, his gaze on the back of my head, but he didn't come to the door. Not until the red-haired officer jerked his chin and said, "Theo Colobert, right?"

Trying to take a steadying breath, I looked over my shoulder as casually as possible and met his gaze as he slowly walked across the front hall to join us. He looked back at me, eyes calm like he'd accepted his fate already.

"That's right," he said when he reached us. He reached down and palmed the top of Athena's head to stop her darting outside to greet the officers.

"So everything's okay here?" The dark-haired one's voice made my head jerk back round. She was already watching me. "Your friend said they went to your place of work this afternoon to see if you were okay, and you weren't there. Are you feeling alright, Mr Sheppard?"

"I'm feeling fine. I just booked the afternoon off."

She watched me in silence for a few moments.

"Do you want to speak to me in private?" she asked carefully, gaze intense. "We can go for a walk. My colleague here can stay with Mr Colobert."

Her voice was hard when she said his name. The ginger-haired officer was still watching him. Theo didn't react, standing calmly beside me. Just waiting.

"Everything's fine here," I heard myself say with another tiny laugh. "We're all fine. But um, thanks for coming to check on us."

"On you," she corrected, still staring at me hard. "We're here to check on *you*, Mr Sheppard."

I laughed again. "Okay, well, I'm fine. I don't need to speak to you in private."

Neither of them moved.

"Are you sure?" the dark-haired officer said.

I smiled at her. "I'm sure."

After another beat of silence, she finally stepped back, the other officer doing the same. "Alright. Well, it's good to see you safe and well, Mr Sheppard."

"Do us a favour and just call your friend back," the red-haired officer said sternly. "They're worried about you, alright?"

I swallowed. "I will. Thanks."

After a curt nod, they finally turned to leave. I didn't move, clutching the door as I watched them climb into the car and pull out of the drive.

I didn't look at Theo as I finally closed the door, but I cleared my throat and said, "Edel called them. I haven't been texting them back, because I

just…”

I saw Theo’s head dip in a jerky nod. “Oh. Right.”

Exhaling a slow breath, I turned to face him. My throat ached at the sight of his drawn face, eyes bracketed with tension.

“Did you—Did you think I called them?”

He blinked, looking shocked by the question. “I mean… yes. Of course I did.”

I found myself letting out a weak snort of laughter. “I thought *you* called them.”

“What?” Theo’s mouth tipped up into an unsure, tentative smile. “Why would I have called them?”

I shook my head. “To turn yourself in, I guess.” The humour fled as quickly as it had bubbled up, and I let out a shaky, sobbing breath. “Theo…”

He swallowed, fingers flexing at his sides. At length, he whispered, “Yes?”

“God, I just…” I rubbed my eyes, shaking my head. “I don’t know.”

We were both silent for a long time. Athena padded away, pausing to stretch before yawning and disappearing into the sitting room.

“Why didn’t you tell them?” Theo eventually asked, his voice low and uncertain.

I sighed wearily, suddenly exhausted. I just wanted to sleep forever. To not have to think about all of this.

“Because I love you,” I said.

Theo’s brows pinched with anguish, overwhelming relief filling his eyes.

“I love you too,” he told me, voice hoarse, then cleared his throat. “I’ll go—I’ll make us some dinner.”

I watched him turn and head for the kitchen, whistling sharply for Athena, who padded lazily out of the sitting room to follow him.

I WAS SITTING in front of the TV when he came into the living room to tell me dinner was ready a while later. I hadn’t even really been watching it, just

staring mindlessly at the moving shapes, the low drone of voices keeping my mind blessedly blank.

As I sat at the island beside him, staring down at the steaming bowl of risotto in front of me, I wondered if maybe… maybe we could just ignore it. Maybe I could just pretend I hadn't seen what I saw. Pretend he hadn't told me he was a three-hundred-year-old demon worshipper who killed people.

But even as I was thinking it, I found myself asking, "Did you kill him? That guy who went missing?"

Theo tensed beside me. "Yes," he eventually said in a stilted voice.

My vision wavered as I stared down at my food, not touching it.

It seemed surreal, but it only hit me in that moment that Theo had killed a *person. People.* People with families, lives, lovers. I'd been so focused on *him*, I hadn't let myself think about the other body that had been down in the cellar with us. I hadn't let myself think of them as anything other than a corpse.

But they'd been a person.

"Who was it?" My voice wobbled, vision growing blurry yet again. "In the cellar. Who were they?"

Theo let out a hard breath. Neither of us had touched our food.

"Ari, I don't think—"

"Who were they?" I asked again more forcefully.

After a beat of silence, he quietly said, "Just a stranger."

I pursed my lips, nodding as if that made any kind of sense. "What made you pick them?"

Theo stiffened. From the corner of my eye, I saw him turn his head to look at me.

"I told you, *I* don't pick them. He does."

God, I couldn't fucking get into that again right now. I just couldn't. Rubbing my face, I nodded again and finally picked up my fork. Once I'd started taking tiny bites, Theo did the same.

We ate in silence until I mumbled, "This is good," even though I was just shovelling it in on autopilot, not really tasting it.

Theo cleared his throat, setting down his fork to reach for his glass of water. "Good."

We finished our meal in miserable, painful silence.

CHAPTER

FORTY

I finally texted Edel back before I went to bed, because I knew I had to. I managed to write out a teasing, light-hearted text about them getting the police involved because they missed me so much, saying I was sorry for not replying all week, but that I'd just been busy.

They responded instantly, saying they were so glad to hear from me and apologising for overreacting. But they asked again if I was alright, saying they'd been worried about me since that morning after they stayed over.

The question made me tense, but at the same time, talking to them was… helping. Helping me feel calm. Feel normal, like everything was fine, and it was just another night.

I told them I'd just been really hungover and missing Theo, then asked them what they'd been up to to distract them. We carried on talking while I brushed my teeth and climbed into bed, but when Theo appeared in the doorway, I quickly lowered my phone to look at him.

His eyes darted to the bed, then back to me. "Do you… do you want me to sleep in another room?"

I stared at him, trying to really consider the question. Could I sleep next to him? Would I actually be able to sleep?

I still knew, deep down, that he wouldn't hurt me. I didn't know why I was so certain of that, but I was. Maybe because he never, ever had before —not unless I'd asked for it while we were having sex. He was always so careful with me. So gentle.

It was hard to truly believe that a murderer treated me better than anyone else ever had.

"No," I heard myself say softly. "It's okay."

He swallowed, nodding once. “I’ll be in in a minute.”

He disappeared, and I heard the bathroom door open and close. Quickly texting Edel back to tell them I was going to sleep, I set my phone down and turned off my bedside light, only the one on Theo’s side spilling a warm glow into the room.

I curled up on my side, facing the empty spot on the bed. Before I could stop it, I was remembering that awful night when I rolled over expecting to see Theo, and instead came face to face with… that thing.

I swallowed, mouth going dry as I pictured its horrible, monstrous face.

What if Theo was telling the truth?

I couldn’t ignore what I’d seen in the cellar. A corpse suspended in the air by nothing, getting dragged into the gaping mouth of a monster. And Theo had mentioned it—had mentioned that the body had been hanging there with nothing to hold it up. I hadn’t told him that was what I’d seen. How was it possible for us to be hallucinating the exact same thing?

I didn’t feel sick or dizzy, or any of the other things I’d read about that also came with carbon monoxide poisoning or black mould inhalation. My stomach didn’t hurt. I wasn’t struggling to breathe. I wasn’t overly lethargic or drowsy. I wasn’t coughing or sneezing, my eyes weren’t itchy.

Physically, I felt completely fine. If it was something tangible in the house, wouldn’t I be experiencing other symptoms? And how could it be shared psychosis—folie a deux, Theo had called it—if I’d seen the demon, that thing, after our very first date, when I’d barely spent any time with him?

I squeezed my eyes shut to try and block out my churning thoughts, but they popped back open the moment I heard the bathroom door open. Theo met my eyes as he stepped into the room, giving me a tiny, hesitant smile before silently getting undressed for bed.

My chest ached as I watched his familiar movements, his routine. As I stared at the person I loved so much it hurt, wondering how the fuck we were going to move on from here. My eyes drifted over his tall, powerful body—the body I loved, wanted, the body that made me feel so safe when it was pressed up against me. I dropped my gaze to the birthmark on his lower back when he turned. That brownish-red thumbprint to the right of his spine.

Except it wasn’t a birthmark. He’d said it was *His* mark. The demon’s.

Theo climbed into bed and lay stiffly on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Eventually, he reached over and turned off the lamp, plunging us into darkness.

I tried to relax my body, but I just couldn't. I was vibrating with nervous energy, too keyed up to even shut my eyes. My breaths escaped me in shallow spurts. Neither of us moved, both tense and stiff under the covers.

Eventually, Theo exhaled and sat up, shoving his hair back and rubbing his face. "I'll go sleep in another room."

"No," I heard myself blurt desperately before I'd even known I was going to speak, reaching out to grip his arm. "No, don't. I—I want you to sleep here."

Theo sighed sadly, looking down at his hands in the dark. "You don't, Ari. You're… scared of me." His voice grew choked, making my chest clench with sorrow. "Which I understand. Of course I do."

I shook my head even though he wasn't looking at me. "I'm not. I'm not scared of you, Theo."

Slowly, he glanced back at me, the whites of his eyes just visible in the dark. He looked miserable, and I could tell he didn't believe me.

"I'm not scared of you," I repeated in a whisper, sitting up to shuffle closer and press myself to his back. My eyes finally slipped shut, body unclenching as I breathed in his scent. "I know you wouldn't hurt me."

It was just everyone else in the world who was at risk.

Theo made a choked sound and gripped my arm as it curled around his front, my fingers sifting through the hair on his belly until he raised my hand and pressed his mouth to the back of it.

"Ari," he croaked, head bent as he kept my hand against his mouth. "I'd rather die than hurt you."

I supposed that was a powerful statement coming from a man who'd sold his soul to a demon in exchange for immortality.

I tensed up at the thought. Did that mean I believed him?

Theo went still when he felt me stiffen up, so I forced myself to relax again and pressed a kiss to the bend of his neck. He shuddered, releasing my hand to reach back and cup my face with aching tenderness.

An overwhelming rush of love for him poured through me, chasing out everything else. This man wasn't a psychotic, mindless killer. He wasn't murdering people for sick pleasure or because of a rabid compulsion. I

knew him. He was calm and steady and level-headed. He was so loving, and kind, and wonderful.

"I believe you," I rasped, resting my chin on his shoulder and wrapping my arms tightly around him. And I realised… I meant it. "I believe you, Theo. About the—about Him."

He froze, then let out a pained, relieved sound.

"Thank you," he whispered.

I uncurled my arms from around him when he shifted on the bed to face me. Hesitating for only a second, I cupped his face, sifting my fingers through his coarse beard, and leaned in to kiss him.

It was gentle. Just a light press of lips, Theo's mouth trembling against mine. He made a hoarse sound and cupped the back of my head, but didn't touch me any more than that. Like he was scared of how I'd react if he did.

Once the kiss ended, I urged him to lie down and curled up into his side, my head on his chest. I listened to the heavy thud of his heart until it gradually started to calm, his body relaxing against mine as he let out a shaky sigh.

He wrapped his arms around me tight, holding me to him. And against all odds, I slept.

CHAPTER

FORTY-ONE

When I woke up the next morning, I was curled up on my side with Theo's big body tucked around me from behind. I could tell he was already awake, because I felt him tense the moment I shifted and started to stretch.

Everything came back to me the instant I opened my eyes, a flood of gruesome images, confusion and fear. With a monumental effort, I forced it all back. I couldn't… I couldn't deal with it all straight away. I just needed a break.

Twisting round in the cradle of Theo's arms, I saw how tense he looked. There were still dark shadows under his eyes, like he hadn't slept at all.

After giving him a tiny smile, I shuffled closer and tilted my head to nuzzle his beard, letting out a sigh when I breathed in his scent.

"Let's do something today," I mumbled. It was Sunday, one of my days off.

I pulled back in time to see Theo blink in shock, his face unsure. "Do something?"

I nodded. "Let's get out of the house for the day. Take Athena somewhere for a long walk."

Theo stared at me in silence, then hesitantly said, "Okay. We could—we could go to the beach."

I smiled, leaning in to kiss his cheek before sitting up. "Perfect."

Theo was slower to get out of bed and start getting dressed, watching me carefully as I pulled on some jeans and a pale blue, oversized shirt. I

brushed my hair and plaited it back, knowing it would probably get completely windswept at the beach.

After using the bathroom and slathering sunscreen on my face, I headed downstairs. It was already a gorgeous day, wispy clouds dotted across the brilliant blue sky. When I opened the back door in the sitting room to let Athena out, I breathed in the warm air, redolent with the scent of honeysuckle. A faint breeze tickled a strand of hair on my cheek and made the trees rustle quietly behind the house. A fat bumblebee drifted lazily past, the low drone of its wings getting fainter as it made its way to the begonias tucked into the shade at the edge of the patio.

Making my way into the kitchen, I started searching the cupboards for a bottle to fill with water to take with us. Under the sink, I also found a collapsible water dish for Athena, so I set both on the island and poured myself a glass of juice from the fridge.

Theo came into the room while I was sipping it, clutching Athena's little-used harness and lead. He placed them both on the island and walked around it towards me, so I smiled at him and held out the glass in offer.

Eyes darting to mine and away again just as fast, he took the glass and had a sip. When he passed it back, I drained the rest of the juice and tugged open the dishwasher to put it in there.

"Ready?" I asked as I straightened up. "Maybe we could stop for coffee on the way."

Theo nodded, then cleared his throat and hesitantly said, "And maybe some breakfast."

I laughed, stepping closer and slipping my arms around his waist. "Of course. You need food."

He stared down at me, his hands lightly settling on the backs of my shoulders. Then he was pulling me closer, hugging me tight and burying his face in my neck. I closed my eyes, breathing him in and feeling the tickle of his beard against my throat.

He didn't say anything. When we eventually pulled back, I cupped his face and gave him a firm kiss.

"I love you," I told him simply, knowing it was answer enough for everything. Maybe it was the wrong answer—maybe I was dealing with this all terribly, immorally—but it was my answer.

We fed Athena before we left, knowing she'd have time to digest her food before we reached the coast, which was about a forty-five-minute

drive away. She was already perky and excited as Theo opened the back door of the car and she clambered into her doggy seat. After clipping her in, he got into the driver's seat next to me and started the engine.

"There's a drive-through coffee place on the way," he said as we pulled down the long drive.

I nodded, opening my window a little to feel the breeze on my face before reaching over to rest my hand over his on the gear stick. He spread his fingers to let mine settle between them, clutching my hand tightly as we drove down long country roads.

When we passed through a town, we stopped at the drive-through place to get coffee and breakfast sandwiches. Theo finally released my hand to eat his while he drove, and by the time the ocean appeared on the horizon, the water sparkling brilliantly in the bright sunlight, I felt calm and content.

I'm just spending a normal, peaceful Sunday with the man I love.

Athena was already whining with excitement when we parked up at the side of a road, her nose twitching frantically as she stuck her head out of the window and sniffed the salty air. Theo chuckled when she shot out of the car the moment he opened the back door, before he whistled at her to come back so he could clip on her lead.

I threaded my fingers through his as we walked towards the promenade at the end of the road. It was still somewhat early, so the beach was almost deserted as we made our way down the uneven stone steps to the sand, just a few other dogwalkers in the distance, though it would no doubt get busy later as the day got hotter.

It was already warm, but the breeze coming off the sea snuck under my loose shirt and made me shiver. After letting Athena off her lead, Theo wrapped his arm around my shoulders so I could nestle into his warmth.

We didn't talk all that much at first, but it wasn't awkward or tense. It was peaceful. A balm after the horror of the day before.

Eventually, I started chatting about inconsequential things. A new film I wanted us to watch. Something Inaya had told me at work. A recipe I'd seen that I wanted him to make.

Slowly, Theo relaxed, chuckling at things I said and telling me he'd make me whatever I wanted, teasingly adding a request to find him something that would be a real challenge.

I told him about the summer house that my *mummo*—my grandma—had had in Finland, about the summers I spent there as a boy, swimming in

the lake, trying to force myself to stay awake because the sky never got truly dark at that time of year. I told him about walking across the lake when it froze in the winter when we'd gone there for a couple of Christmases, about how locals were confident enough to even drive over it thanks to their ingrained ability to spot and avoid the weak patches where the ice was thinner.

"Have you ever been to Finland?" I asked, remembering him saying that he'd lived all over on our first date. And if he'd… if he'd really been alive for so long, surely he had to have travelled a lot.

"No, not Finland," he mused, then smiled down at me. "Maybe we can go there sometime."

I grimaced. "Maybe, but I'm not particularly keen for you to meet my mother. She's pretty narcissistic. We weren't very close when I was growing up. I was closer to my mummo, but she always lived in Finland so I didn't get to see her all that often. And then, um, she died a couple of years ago, so..."

Theo kissed the top of my head. "I'm sorry, dimples."

"Thanks."

As I looked up at him, he came to a stop and turned to face me. His throat bobbing, he cupped the nape of my neck and dipped his head to kiss me.

I kissed him back immediately, lifting a hand to palm his cheek, tracing the edge of his beard with my fingertips. I shivered when our mouths opened, tongues meeting in a slow glide. I could taste the bitter hint of coffee mingled with something that was uniquely him. It made me wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer as warmth bloomed in my belly.

We broke apart when Athena started barking madly up ahead. Looking over, I chuckled when I saw her and another dog bounding after each other, splashing through the water. The other owner was watching them with a wry smile, slowly walking in our direction.

I smiled at him as he passed us while Theo whistled for Athena. She gave the other dog a final sniff before trotting over the sand towards us.

We walked for a long time, slowly making our way up the beach before turning to head back. We passed several other dog owners, giving them brief nods and smiles and 'good mornings'.

With every person we came across, I had to force back the intrusive thoughts that threatened to push their way to the front of my brain, spoiling

everything. Thoughts like, *What if his demon is telling him to kill them right now? What if they're next?*

But Theo was calm beside me. There was no sick gleam in his eye as he looked at people, like he was imagining slicing their throats open. There was no vacant, disjointed expression on his face as if he was listening to a demon talking to him in his head.

After giving Athena a big drink of water beside the car, Theo suggested we find somewhere for an early lunch as we climbed in. I teased him about always having food on the brain, which made him laugh and reach over to squeeze my thigh as he drove.

We ended up finding a quaint gastropub next to a river and sat outside to eat fancy burgers with triple-cooked chips. Athena lounged lazily at our feet, worn out from her walk but still keen-eyed for any scraps that might have fallen off the table.

On the way home, Theo stopped at a supermarket and ran in to pick up some things for dinner while I stayed in the car with Athena, the windows open to keep us cool. I texted Edel while I waited for him, sending them a photo of Athena splashing through the surf.

Beach day? Jealous!! they responded a few minutes later. *We're stuck at Amir's parents' for Sunday lunch. Babies everywhere.*

I chuckled, absently running my thumb over the velvety soft pink petal still stuck to the back of the case. The sight of it didn't freak me out anymore. I was used to it, and I knew it wasn't coming off. I could always get a new phone case, but I hadn't bothered.

I looked down at it, tracing the edges which had seemed to melt into the plastic. I took a calming breath as I remembered waking up surrounded by a sea of roses.

What had that gesture meant? From… Him? Theo had said He wanted me. Was that His way of… trying to show me? Scattering flowers all around me and lying down beside in the bed, like He was… trying to seduce me.

My gut clenched with a bewildering blend of apprehension and arousal. There *was* arousal there, making me confused and nervous. I remembered that dream again. The intense heat that had surged in my belly, how close I'd been to coming when I'd woken up.

Did… did Theo's demon want to fuck me?

And was I sick for the fact that… it wasn't fear I was feeling at the thought of it? It wasn't disgust or revulsion.

It was lust, I realised.

A powerful, inhuman being wanted me so much that He'd been… trying to *court* me. His face was horrifying, monstrous, but I… I couldn't stop picturing it. I remembered Him in the cellar. His huge, hulking body covered in fur, His legs bending wrong and ending in cloven hooves. The proud horns jutting up from His head. The rasp of His flat snout against my throat.

Now that I knew He was a part of Theo… linked to Theo… it was making me think about Him differently. Theo had said He wanted to protect me. He *wanted* me.

Maybe… maybe He'd just been trying to show me that, in His own demonic, inhuman way.

I jumped when the driver's door opened, flushing as Theo climbed in and twisted round to set a shopping bag on the back seat.

"I got some good chocolate to make the mousse you like." He smiled over at me as he started the engine, seeming more like his normal self again.

I pushed down the troubling knot of lust squeezing my stomach and smiled back, stretching over to kiss his cheek. "Sounds great. Thank you."

He squeezed my thigh before shifting his hand onto the gear stick, putting the car in reverse to back out of the space. "Ready to go home? Or do you… do you want to go somewhere else?"

"No, let's go home." I stretched lazily, yawning as I tipped my head back on the seat. "Sea air always makes me sleepy."

Theo chuckled. "We could sit out by the pool with some beers for the rest of the afternoon."

"Mmm, yes." I rolled my head on the seat to smile at him. "I want to finish my book."

Maybe there was something wrong with me, planning a slow, easy Sunday with a man who murdered people regularly. But he wasn't just *a* man. He was Theo. *My* Theo.

Maybe a normal response would have been to pack my bags and never look back. To tell the police what I'd seen, tell them everything Theo had confessed. But I couldn't. I couldn't just leave him. I loved him. You didn't just abandon the people you loved when things got difficult. That was what

my dad had done when I was tiny—if he'd ever actually loved me. That was what mother did when I turned eighteen, essentially washing her hands of me to move back to Finland and call maybe once every couple of months at the most.

If I thought of Theo's… demon as something similar to an addiction or an illness, it was easier to compartmentalise. It was something he had to deal with, along with all the ramifications… including killing people.

Which, yes, was generally outside the scope of usual relationship issues. But it was what we had to face.

The wisteria looked glorious on the front of the house as we pulled into the drive a while later, fat new blooms dripping from the branches, their colour a vibrant lilac. The heat in the air made their scent even stronger as we stepped through the front door into the cool front hall, my eyes taking a few seconds to adjust.

As Theo headed into the kitchen to grab us some beers from the fridge, I went upstairs to use the bathroom and change into a tiny pair of swimming shorts. My hair was a windswept mess from the beach, so I quickly brushed the plait out and threw it up into a sloppy bun on the top of my head. After grabbing my book, sunscreen and towel and slipping on my sunglasses, I went back downstairs.

The back doors to the patio were already open in the sitting room, and when I stepped outside I saw Theo rolling back the cover over the pool, revealing its sparkling blue surface.

Two ice cold bottles of beer were waiting on the little side table between the sun loungers, so I settled on the one under the parasol and put my stuff down beside them. Then I began the arduous task of rubbing sunscreen over every uncovered inch of me.

Theo wandered over from the pool, his eyes flaring as he watched me. I watched him back as he pulled off his shirt and dumped it on the end of the other sun lounger, followed by his boots, socks and jeans.

My gut clenched with longing when he stripped off his boxer briefs, revealing every inch of his big, powerful body.

He didn't get in the water straight away. After spreading out the towel I'd left for him, he sat on the edge of the lounger and leaned forward to grab the two bottles, passing one to me. My fingers were greasy with sunscreen as I took it, leaving smears on the dark amber glass.

I tried not to stare between his thick, spread thighs as he raised his bottle to his lips and took a long gulp, his throat bobbing. His thick cock was relaxed, soft and ruddy against the nest of short, dark curls at its base. His balls hung low, loose and a slightly deeper shade than his tanned skin.

I sipped my beer, savouring the cool fermented taste as he set his bottle back down with a sigh and wiped his beard. Reaching for his jeans, he fished his cigarette packet and lighter out of the pocket and tapped one out. I settled down with my book while he lounged back and smoked lazily beside me, the sharp scent drifting over and making my nose twitch.

Once he'd finished, he got up and carried his beer to the pool. Glancing up, I watched his backside flex as he walked. Lust flared again, sharp and hot, when he bent down to place his bottle at the edge and I saw his balls hanging low between his thighs, the shadowy dip between hair-dusted cheeks.

He dove into the deep end, emerging a few seconds later to cut lazily through the water. When he swam to the edge and reached for his beer, he grinned at me as he caught me staring at him.

"Don't want to come for a swim?" he asked, taking a sip of beer. He propped his arms on the edge of the pool, blue beard glistening with droplets of water.

A hint of a smile teased the corner of my mouth. "You know I'm more of a sunbather than a swimmer."

He chuckled. "Except you always sit in the shade."

I shot him a mock glare. "Too much sun is bad for you! It ages you."

His pierced brow quirked. "Doesn't age me."

I stared at him. That was right. Because of… because of his pact.

Licking my lips, I set down my book and shifted my feet onto the hot patio. "Okay. For a little while."

Theo grinned again, white teeth gleaming in the sun. "Bring your beer."

I carried it over, setting it beside his before making my way to the steps at the shallow end. I flinched when I dipped my toes into the cold water, but it felt good lapping around my ankles as I descended.

"Not going to take your shorts off, dimples?" Theo rasped as he lazily swam closer.

"Have to protect my modesty," I said innocently, then added, "Plus the water's cold."

He laughed, wading through the shallow end to meet me. I tilted my chin up to kiss him when he reached me, slipping warm hands around my waist under the water.

The kiss grew heated quickly, the sharp taste of beer on our tongues. I shivered, wrapping my legs around his waist when he palmed my ass and hefted me up. Theo trailed his mouth across my cheek and jaw, dropping kisses down to my neck until he laughed and pulled back.

"Your neck tastes like sunscreen."

I grinned, following him when he set me down to make his way to our drinks resting at the edge of the pool. "That's the price you have to pay if you don't want wrinkles."

Theo gave me a wry smile as he passed me my bottle. "You don't like my wrinkles?"

Gripping his arm to hoist myself up, I pressed a kiss to the faint laugh lines fanning out from the corner of his eye. "I love *yours*. I don't want them myself."

He went still, something flaring in his eyes as he stared at me. But he didn't say anything, just lifted his bottle to take a long gulp.

I did the same, propping my elbow on the edge of the pool. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to drink and swim."

Theo chuckled, draining the last of his beer. "I know you're small, but I don't think one beer's going to make you too drunk to swim."

I glared at him. "I'm not *that* small."

"No." He smirked at me as his hand found my ass under the water and gave it a squeeze. "Perfect size."

I set my beer down to slide my hand over his soft belly, moving closer to rest my cheek on his shoulder. "So are you."

He kissed the top of my head, leaving his mouth pressed to my hot scalp. My eyes slid shut as I breathed in the mingled scents of chlorine and his sun-warmed skin.

This was what I couldn't bear to give up. I didn't care about the pool or the big house, or that he had a lot of money. I cared about *him*. I didn't want to spend my life without him.

And that meant accepting everything he came with.

When we eventually got out, Theo went inside to get us two more beers. I carried on reading my book while he chain-smoked on the sun lounger

beside me, occasionally asking me if I liked the sound of a new recipe as he looked them up on his phone.

When he lit yet another cigarette, I lowered my book and looked over at him.

"Doesn't it worry you?" I nodded at the cigarette when he glanced over. "Smoking?"

He gazed back at me steadily. "I can't get sick."

I gulped, nodding quickly as I rubbed my chest. "Oh. Right. Is that… Is that why you never seem to worry about your dick getting sunburnt?"

After a pause, Theo slowly looked down at his groin, his relaxed cock resting against his thigh with the hot late-afternoon sun beating down on his stretched-out body. He burst out laughing.

"I guess so." He flashed me a wolfish smile. "But thank you for your concern about my dick, dimples."

I grinned, dropping my book to stretch my arms up over my head. "Would hate for you to damage such an important piece of equipment."

"I'll keep that in mind." Chuckling, he reached down for his discarded boxer briefs, draping them over his groin. "There. All safe."

I couldn't tear my eyes away. Somehow, just his dick being covered was even more erotic than if he was still completely nude. The bunched-up fabric sloped over the shape of his cock between his spread thighs, the dark hair at the root still visible and trailing up his stomach.

God, why couldn't I stop thinking about sex? I was an unapologetically sexual person, and our sex life had been incredible right from the beginning, but I wasn't normally this… fixated.

Maybe it was because we hadn't had sex for about a week, but it wasn't like I hadn't gone countless weeks without sex before. And it wasn't like we usually had sex every single night anyway. It wasn't the core of our relationship. It was just a wonderful part of it that we both enjoyed.

Maybe I just missed being close to Theo. The last week had been tense, and I'd missed falling asleep wrapped around him or with his big body spooning me. I'd just… missed feeling his skin against mine.

I was pretty sure that if I slipped off my shorts and straddled Theo's lap right now, or pulled away the briefs covering his groin to suck his dick into my mouth, he'd be up for it. But I didn't. While today had been exactly what I needed—a calming escape, time to confirm how much I loved him—we couldn't ignore real life forever. We had to deal with it all.

There was a third person—being—hovering at the edge of our relationship now, trying to get in.

"I'm going to take a shower." I stood up and stretched, pleasantly tired from too much sun and fresh air.

Stepping closer to Theo, I leaned down to kiss him while gently patting his covered dick. Even though it was a light touch, his hips still flinched from the sudden contact.

"Keep that safe for me," I said teasingly as I straightened back up, hearing him chuckle as I walked into the house.

Athena was passed out in the shade, snoring on her back, exhausted from her long walk on the beach. I tiptoed past so I didn't disturb her, then went upstairs to jump in the shower.

The house still felt peaceful. I was relaxed, and my head felt clearer than it had in months, despite everything that had happened. Everything I'd discovered.

Theo came up to take a shower himself once I was stepping out of the bathroom, giving me a kiss as he passed me in the hall. I dried off slowly in the bedroom, my muscles loose and relaxed, before slipping on my pyjamas and sitting down in front of the mirror to do my skincare. My face felt dry and tight from the sea air.

I was just finishing up when Theo walked in with a towel wrapped around his waist. He dropped it to pull on his old, worn shorts and told me he was going to start making my chocolate mousse for later.

I settled in front of the TV in the sitting room while he pottered around the kitchen, putting on a random sitcom. But it wasn't enough to distract me. My mind kept drifting back to the demon, fixating on Him.

I wanted to know exactly what He wanted with me. I wanted… to speak to Him. To face Him on a more even footing, when I was prepared and wasn't petrified, cowering in the dark.

And I didn't want to wake up tomorrow and have to work so hard to distract myself again. We needed to face it all now, to figure out how we were going to move on from this—from the knowledge I now had.

Maybe… maybe I would have some sway over Him, if He wanted me so badly. Maybe I could ask Him to stop making Theo kill people in His name.

I heard Theo leave the kitchen and head upstairs, so I quickly turned the TV off and stood. When I made it into the bedroom, I saw him plugging his

phone into the charger on his bedside table.

He glanced back at me and smiled. “You okay, dimples? My phone died.”

I swallowed, but my voice was still unsteady when I said, “Yeah, I’m okay.”

Theo tensed, slowly turning to face me with a wary expression, like he knew the blissful day we had just spent ignoring everything was about to come to an end.

Taking a deep breath, I looked him dead in the eyes and said, “I want to speak to Him.”

CHAPTER

FORTY-TWO

Theo didn't seem to know how to respond at first, his mouth opening and closing wordlessly.

"I…" He scrubbed a hand over his face, shoving back his hair. "Wh-why?"

I drew myself up taller, straightening my spine. "I want to know what He wants with me. What He's been trying to achieve all this time."

Theo went pale. "I told you, Ari. He… *wants* you."

"Yes, but what does that mean? Does He want me to—to make a pact with Him the way you have? Or is it…"

When I trailed off, Theo swallowed and croaked, "No, not in that way. He doesn't want you for that."

"So I want to ask Him." I looked at Theo. "Is there a way for me to speak with Him? Do I—do I have to go down to the cellar?"

"No," Theo barked. "No, don't—I don't want you going in that room."

"Okay," I said in a voice calmer than I felt. My heart was already pounding, but I was determined. "Is there another way? You—you said before that if you say His name, He'll come."

"Not always," Theo said unsteadily. "He doesn't answer to me. He makes that clear. He does what He wants."

"Well, wouldn't He want a chance to speak to me? Isn't that what He's wanted this whole time?"

"I suppose so, but He…" Theo took a step closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. "If He thinks we're trying to manipulate Him in some way, He won't come. He'll get angry."

God, the last thing I wanted to do was make Him angry when He would no doubt take it out on Theo and probably make him do something horrific again.

I sat down heavily on the side of the bed and rubbed my face. “Oh.”

After a few seconds, Theo slowly sat beside me and stared down at his hands. “I could… I could let Him in.”

I looked at him. “What do you mean?”

Taking a deep breath, he said, “When I allow it, He can possess me. Take over my body. But I don’t allow it often. It’s one small bit of control I have with Him, so if He feels me letting Him in… He’ll jump at the chance.”

“But… doesn’t He have His own body?” I asked, brow furrowing. “I’ve seen Him.”

Theo shook his head. “It’s not… corporeal enough. He can’t show Himself for long that way. He can make you briefly feel like He’s touching you, but it’s not real. It’s not really there. It’s not enough.”

I didn’t know what to think as I stared at Theo and saw the longing in his eyes. Heard it in his voice.

“But can’t He… He can manipulate things, right? He slammed the door yesterday, and the—the lilies—”

“When He’s at His strongest—” Theo’s voice grew hesitant, and I knew why. I knew what that meant. He was at His strongest just after Theo had sacrificed someone in His name. “When He’s at His strongest, He can manipulate things, yes. Small things, kind of like a poltergeist. But in His form, He wouldn’t be able to sit here and talk to you for long. He’s not… from this world. He’s not really meant to be here. He’s here because of me.”

“Is letting Him possess you… dangerous for you?” I asked in a whisper. Theo shook his head.

“No, not for me.” He shifted to face me fully, expression bleak. “But do you understand what I’ve been telling you, Ari? He *wants* you. And He’s a demon. He… doesn’t react well to not getting what He wants.”

My belly clenched with a stab of arousal, shockingly strong. I didn’t know if Theo noticed my reaction, if he could somehow tell, but his eyes flared. Lifting a hand, he cupped my face and smoothed his thumb over my cheekbone.

“If I did this, I would still be here,” he told me. “I’d still be in this body. He would just be in it too. We’d both be aware of everything happening,

everything being said. So whatever happens… I'd be a part of it too. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I stared at him, sucking in shallow breaths. Was he… was he giving me permission?

"I understand," I whispered.

"And if He does anything one of us doesn't like, I can force Him back. I have the control when it comes to this—I'm allowing Him in, and I can revoke that right just as fast. Does that make sense?"

"Yes."

"You won't be in any danger," Theo told me, his steady eyes fixed on mine. "Not that He wants to harm you anyway. If there was even a remote chance of that, I wouldn't be agreeing to this. But say your safeword if you want Him to go, and I'll force Him back straight away."

"But what if—what if that doesn't work? What if you can't force Him back?"

"I'll be able to. I promise," he said calmly, taking my hand and squeezing. "But on the off chance it takes… longer than it should, run to the winter garden, okay?"

That made me think about the times He'd been hammering on the winter garden door, screaming my name, pacing manically in the library. "Why… why can't He go in there?"

"When I moved in here, I did a ritual in there to keep Him out. I needed one place in the world where I knew I could be truly alone. Sometimes He can get… relentless."

I blinked, wondering why he'd picked that room and not his bedroom.

But I was already starting to suspect that I knew the answer.

Theo exhaled a slow breath and rubbed his palms along his thighs, Adam's apple bobbing with a nervous swallow. "Okay. You want to… do it now?"

Fear streaked through me, but I forced myself to say, "Yes. I want to do it now. Get it over with."

"Alright." Theo let out another long breath and looked at me. "I love you, Ari."

"I love you too." I felt my chin wobble, which made him smile.

"I told you, I'll still be here." He reached over and cupped my chin. "I'll be aware of everything. Like I said, Ari, if anything starts to happen that either of us aren't comfortable with, I'll put a stop to it. Okay?"

I nodded, darting forward to kiss him before standing up from the bed on trembling legs as he rolled his shoulders, letting out a sharp breath. When his eyes slid shut and he went perfectly still, I took a few more steps back, my chest rising quickly with my shallow breaths. I didn't move an inch while I waited, staring at him, trying to prepare myself.

But I still wasn't ready when Theo's eyes suddenly flashed open, making me jump. I sucked in a breath when I saw that his irises had turned jet black and were bleeding into the whites of his eyes until they were solid, impenetrable orbs. Tiny white pupils swivelled manically around the room, taking everything in, before they landed on me.

Theo's mouth stretched into a wide, rabid grin. His voice was all wrong when he spoke—too deep, distorted, rumbling in the pit of my stomach.

"Hello, my sweet bloom."

CHAPTER

FORTY-THREE

If I'd had any lingering doubts that Theo's demon wasn't real, they were all obliterated in that moment.

I was looking at Theo, at his body, but it wasn't him. He was in there somewhere—he'd told me he still would be—but he wasn't the one controlling that familiar form. Not anymore.

He stood up from the bed and stretched, joints cracking. Rolling His neck, He blinked rapidly and winced, like the light was too bright for Him in here even though it was dusk now, the sky getting dark through the window.

"He hasn't allowed me to take over in a long time." He chuckled, the sound rich and deep and raspy, making my stomach squeeze into a knot.

When His head snapped to the side and those white pupils fixed on me, I sucked in a panicked breath and took a step back, then another as He started stalking towards me, His gait all wrong, prowling and predatory. I was trembling madly as my back hit the bedroom wall beside the chest of drawers, my head tilting back so I could keep looking at Him as He came to a stop in front of me.

Theo's body somehow looked even bigger, towering over me. It was Theo's face I was looking at, but it was different at the same time. It was almost like I could see glimpses of His form in the corner of my eye—the ghostly outline of horns jutting up, the hazy impression of thick fur coating His wide chest. The shadowy tips of sharp claws as He raised a hand to my face.

He pressed a single fingertip lightly against my trembling chin, mouth quirking into a smirk. "Are you proud of how well I've been behaving the

last few days, my sweet Ari? I held myself back so that we didn't scare you off completely."

When I stayed silent, trying to calm my pounding heart, His smirk vanished as His gaze dropped, roaming over my body.

"Even though I am so hungry for you," He rasped, smoothing both hands down my front. I gasped, trying to fight the way my body wanted to arch into the touch. "You're hungry for me too, aren't you? You don't understand it, but you are."

Heat rose in my face. Theo could hear this. He'd told me. I didn't know whether to be utterly ashamed or humiliated, because I wasn't denying it.

His pierced brow quirked, hands retreating from my body. "Nothing to say to me, sweet one?"

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. I had to say *something*. Theo had done this so I could talk to Him.

"I—" His eyes flared with intrigue when I finally started to speak, His head cocking like an animal. I lifted my chin, trying to make my voice firm. "I w-want to ask you to stop telling Theo to kill people."

He went very still, then let out another rumbling chuckle. "So that's why he allowed me in."

"No," I said quickly, terrified that He was going to punish Theo for it. "No. Theo didn't know I was going to ask you that."

"Ah, yes. But you love him enough to ask, don't you? You love him as madly as he loves you. It's a shame my kind can't harness that emotion. It makes you all so wild, so uncontrollable. Makes you do such foolish, destructive things." He huffed, lip curling into a sneer. "I didn't know he was capable of feeling that way about anyone but himself. But you… you have taken over his mind."

His head cocked again, eyes growing vacant. "Perhaps that's why I feel this need for you. Perhaps it's an echo of what he feels." His grin grew sharp as His eyes snapped back to me. "But what *I* feel for you is not *love*, sweet Ari. I do not *love*."

I swallowed, forcing myself to hold His gaze. "What… what do you feel for me, then?"

His jaw clenched, eyes growing hard as if He was loath to admit it. "Obsession. Devotion. I see your sweetness, and my nature should tell me to try and sully it. Destroy it. But with you, it doesn't. With you, it tells me to *worship* you."

Tingles raced over my body, getting stronger when big hands cupped my waist and His eyes roamed again as He snarled, “I want to gorge myself on you, but not in the same way as the others. In a way that brings us all only pleasure.”

Us all, He’d said. Not us *both*, because Theo was here too. Theo was a part of this too.

And Theo wasn’t forcing Him back, despite the direction this seemed to be heading. Which meant… which meant he had to be okay with it.

I was panting lightly, my body reacting to the confusing blend of Theo’s familiar, beautiful form in front of me and His seductive words, His deep rumbling voice.

“I can see it in your face, my sweet Ari,” He crooned, lifting a hand to cup my face. His thumb pressed under my jaw, tilting my chin up. “We both can. You want it as much as I do. As we do.”

“I—I—”

He smirked, white pupils flaring as they locked on my mouth. “Will you kiss me, Ari? My kind don’t partake in such simple, human things. But with you, I want to experience them all.” His chest heaving, He hissed out a snarling, rabid breath. “I want to feast on you. To take everything you give me.”

Oh god. I could feel myself succumbing, my trembling lips parting as I stared up at Him, my gaze growing heavy.

Theo would stop this if he didn’t want me to, right? That was what he’d said. He’d even hinted at knowing that this would happen. He’d even seemed like he wished it could be *him* on the receiving end of His… attention.

He dipped His head lower, until our lips were just millimetres apart. Until my trembling breaths tangled with His deep, steady ones in the scant space between us and I could feel the bristles of His beard tickling my skin.

With a choked sound of surrender, I surged up and crushed my mouth to His.

He didn’t kiss me the way Theo did. He was docile at first as He figured out what to do, as He experienced this human thing for the first time, and then He was growling against my mouth and gripping my head in clawing hands, taking over the kiss completely.

I shuddered against Him as His tongue surged into my mouth, thrusting hungrily and clumsily. Nothing like Theo, but the hunger in His kiss was

making me tremble with lust. I could *feel* how much He wanted me, and it was intoxicating and terrifying all at once. But the fear… that low thrum of fear that remained, the primitive part of my brain that made me so aware that I was in the presence of something *other*… it sharpened the arousal to overwhelming intensity, tightening up my insides, making my pulse rabbit frantically in my throat.

He let out a clipped groan into my mouth, hips surging forward until I felt the thick, hard length of Him brushing against my belly. When He jerked His head back, breaking the kiss, we were both breathing hard.

He looked down, going very still before taking a small step back. “This is new.”

I watched through wide eyes as He reached down and gripped the outline of His erection through the shorts. His hips jerked again, a snarl leaving Him as he ran His palm up and down the straining length. His other hand flattened against the wall beside my head.

“This…” He met my gaze, His eyes wild. “This is what I want. I have felt this lust for so very long, but my form has no outlet for it.” His lip curled, eyes narrowing accusingly like this was *my* fault. “My kind is supposed to be above this… baseless desire.”

Before I could think of any kind of response to that, He was gripping my face again and thrusting His tongue back into my mouth. I moaned helplessly, sliding my hands up His chest, phantom fur teasing my fingertips.

“I have watched you with him,” He rasped against my mouth. “I want what you give him. I want to feel it for myself.”

I was gasping for breath, trying to think. “You want… you w-want to fuck me?”

He huffed in dark amusement as He pulled back, licking His lips. “I suppose that is the word for it. A simple way to sum up what I want to give to you. What I want to take from you.”

Holding my gaze, white pupils steady in those endless black eyes, He reached over and pulled open the top drawer of the dresser beside us. Our heads turned at the same time to see what He’d revealed.

“I want you in this,” He rasped as I stared at my lingerie sets, neatly tucked into the drawer.

Long fingers sifting through the dainty fabric, He pulled out a set in pure white lace. Then He smiled, wide and menacing.

“I want you in this,” He repeated, rubbing His thumb over the soft lace. “I want to rip it from your delicate body and feast on what I uncover.”

Oh fuck. I could barely suck in a full breath, my cock straining against the silky material of my pyjama bottoms, the tip seeping wetness through the fabric.

“Okay,” I heard myself whisper, my dick jerking when His eyes flared.

He smiled widely again, cupping my cheek and tugging at my lower lip with His thumb. “You will look so perfect for me, my sweet bloom.”

I shivered, unable to move at first when He released me and stepped back. He started wandering around the room, picking up almost everything He could reach, touching and feeling textures He probably couldn’t experience in His true form.

Moving slowly on trembling legs, I changed into the lingerie set. My eyes darted to Him every few seconds, but He wasn’t looking at me, no doubt wanting to wait until I was ready, exactly as He’d demanded. He picked up my hairbrush and ran His fingertips over the bristles, then carefully pulled a strand of my blond hair free to examine it.

Going very still, He slowly reached out and curled His fingers around the towel Theo had left draped over the back of the dressing table chair. I stared as He raised it to His nose and inhaled deeply, a shudder running over His back.

“He used this,” He murmured into the towel, burying His face deeper and taking another long breath. I saw His cock jerk in His shorts, making my breath catch.

Did He… Did He want Theo that way too?

His head whipped round at the sound, white pupils expanding in a greedy rush as He took me in. Dropping the towel back onto the chair, He stalked closer, but paused to pluck my long, sheer nightgown from the hook on the back of the door.

“And this,” He rasped, holding it out to me.

I took it automatically, my body trembling finely as I slipped it on. “Why?”

He smiled at me, sharp and predatory. “Because you might get cold.”

I didn’t see how I would get cold if we were going to… fuck. Licking my dry lips, I tentatively asked, “Wh-why would I get cold?”

His mouth twisted into a smirk as He stepped closer, looming over me. “Because you’re going to run for me, Ari. And I am going to catch you.”

My breath shuddered out of me as I stared at Him. “R-run?”

He smiled wide, eyes flaring with hunger. “Like a petrified little rabbit.”

He trailed His fingertips down my sides, over my hips, running them along the edge of my lace panties. Shivers broke out all over me, my cock straining, the length of it clearly visible through the delicate fabric. I gasped when He brushed His fingers over it, just a brief touch, His head cocking in fascination.

“Like a lost lamb that wandered from its flock,” He continued, mouth stretching wider, His teeth flashing sharp. “And I am the charging bull that will chase you down and gore you.”

Fear crept in, blending with the arousal in a confusing tangle. If anything, it made my cock even harder. “Do you want to hurt me?”

His pierced brow quirked, hands sliding to my hips. “If I wanted to hurt you, I would have made my vessel do it by now.”

His vessel. He meant Theo. Tilting my chin up, I stared at Him hard and said, “Theo wouldn’t hurt me.”

He huffed in amusement. “No, he wouldn’t. For once, he cares about someone other than himself.” Pupils flashing slyly, he added, “But you like him to hurt you sometimes, don’t you, Ari? I have seen it. I’ve seen how much you crave the hint of danger.”

Slowly, He curled a hand lightly round my throat, not applying any pressure, but I could feel the weight of His palm against my Adam’s apple when I swallowed. My eyes grew heavy with lust, breaths trembling out of me.

“It excites you,” He rasped, His other hand sliding up my front to rest over my wildly beating heart. “Being at the mercy of another. Your life in their hands. The sharp bites of pain to remind you that you have allowed them to do anything to you.”

He was right. I loved it. Being bitten, having my hair pulled, being tied down and choked. Giving myself over completely, willingly. Becoming a vessel for another person’s lust. Just as Theo was a vessel for this creature.

“Don’t you?” He murmured, thumb trailing down the underside of my chin. For a second, I felt the sharp phantom drag of a claw.

“Yes,” I whispered, gazing up at Him.

He smirked, reaching up to tug my hair free of its bun, letting it tumble over my shoulders.

“Are you going to run for me, Ari?”

“Yes,” I whispered again.

CHAPTER

FORTY-FOUR

My heart was already racing as I started to run. I'd had enough sense to grab the lube and tuck it into the side of my panties before I took off, knowing without a doubt that I was going to need it.

My breaths escaped me in panicked, excited spurts as I thudded down the stairs, hearing nothing behind me for a few seconds until He growled in the bedroom and started to chase me.

I froze at the bottom of the stairs, panicking about where to go, my pulse leaping when I heard Him crash into the hallway upstairs. Turning right, I raced across the front hall, my bare feet smacking against the tiles and my sheer robe billowing out behind me.

He hit the bottom step as I burst into the library, making a beeline for the winter garden. My mouth tipped into a breathless smile as I skidded into the room and came to a stop, spinning round to see Him jerk back at the threshold, unable to come in.

He snarled, and my smile grew wider, turned cocky. I wanted to remind Him that *I* was in control here. That I was *letting* Him chase me. And catch me.

He'd taken off His shorts, and His cock looked achingly stiff already, jutting out from His hips, flushed a deep, angry red. He growled—a low, inhuman sound—gripping the doorframe as He stared at me with dark eyes, His chest heaving with snarling breaths.

I backed up slowly, then turned to run to the other end of the room. As I fumbled with the handle on the door that led outside, I glanced back and saw His pupils gleam, before He turned to run back through the house.

Bursting out onto the patio, I sprinted round the side of the house to beat Him and ran down the stone steps. The moment my feet hit the grass, I glanced back to see Him pounding through the sitting room to the open doors.

The sky was a deep purple now, and the air looked hazy as I ran, my feet slipping on damp grass. I heard the thud of His feet hitting the earth, the heavy pounding steps as He chased me. My cock was leaking in my panties, shivers breaking out all over me from the cool evening air and the anticipation of Him catching me. My robe fluttered behind me, and I screamed when I felt something tug on the end of it, the sheer material ripping easily.

My feet slipped out from under me as it brought me to a sudden stop. I landed on my hands and knees with a grunt, but it turned into a sharp gasp of excitement when I felt the heat of Him pressing against my raised backside through my robe.

He snarled rabidly, and a long ripping sound filled the air as He tore the robe all the way up the back. Then clawing fingers were grasping my hips, sliding under the waistband of my panties to rip them off my body too.

The heat of His body vanished as He moved back, long fingers gripping my ass and spreading me wide for His gaze. I cried out when I felt sharp teeth sink into my backside, my cock bucking in the air now that it was free. I collapsed onto my elbows, curving my spine to raise my ass higher.

A ravenous tongue attacked my hole, plunging inside too fast, bringing with it a sharp sting that made me moan. The bristles of His beard tickled my skin as He devoured me, lips sucking, tongue lapping and sinking inside as deep as it could.

It felt like His fingers were tipped with sharp claws as He dragged them down my thighs, bringing more sharp, stinging pain that vanished as quickly as it flared. He was grunting against my hole like an animal, never stopping or slowing, never giving me a chance to try and catch up with the unimaginable pleasure making me tremble wildly. I couldn’t stop gasping out frantic moans, my fingers curling into the grass and gripping tight.

One of His hands vanished from my leg, and a second later I heard the click of the lubricant tube that had fallen onto the grass when He ripped my panties away. I whined when His mouth retreated, hips straining back to try and tempt Him.

A slick finger circled my twitching hole before plunging inside. I cried out, head tipping back, only vaguely aware of the rumbling huff He let out.

"See, bloom?" His voice was so deep and gravelly. Inhuman. "I can be careful with your fragile little body too. I watched. I *learned* for you."

He pulled free and returned with a second finger, twisting them as they sank back inside. He snarled, breaths huffing out of Him like a rabid beast.

"It's so hot," He panted, sounding on the brink of losing control, which made my cock drool pre-cum onto the grass. "I crave it. I need to fill you."

"Pl-please," I gasped out, my eyes threatening to roll back as He crammed a third finger inside, the stretch making me ache in the way I needed.

He snarled again and pulled His fingers free. I heard the erotic sound of Him pumping His slippery hand over His cock fast, making it slick. Then He shifted, and as I looked back to see Him, I let out a desperate whimper.

He was mounting me, squatting down and gripping His cock to press it against my hole. I bore down quickly, a curt shout leaving me as the head popped inside. The sting was overwhelming for only a second, but the ache remained as He tunnelled inside in short, sharp jabs, hands curling round my waist and gripping tight.

The deep groan that left Him was unsteady, utter shock colouring it. I clenched around His base when His hips butted up against my ass, and I could feel His thighs trembling as His cock bucked inside me.

"Yes," He groaned, fingers digging into my skin. "This is what I wanted."

He pulled back, letting out another choked, shocked sound at the feel of His cock dragging through my channel. Then He was slamming back inside and starting up a brutal pace.

I was moaning deliriously as He rutted into me like a mindless beast, still squatting over me. His breaths snarled out of Him, heavy and unsteady, His sac smacking against mine with every jarring thrust.

I could smell the damp earth as my cheek pressed into the grass, hands still clenched around fistfuls of it. My cock was painfully stiff, hanging between my legs, but I didn't reach down to touch it. I couldn't. I didn't want to come yet. I didn't want it to end.

His hips stuttered, then sped up even more until He was pounding into me so hard and fast I went limp. I moaned mindlessly when I felt His cock

swell and start to flex inside me. He cried out, the sound shocked and strangely vulnerable, His hips jerking as He came.

He leaned heavily on my back for a few seconds as He recovered, breathing hard. But then His hips started moving again, picking up speed rapidly. His hands released my waist to curl under my shoulders, gripping tight and tugging me back into every manic thrust.

He fucked me so hard my teeth clattered, my whole body succumbing and going limp until He was the only thing holding me up. My vision winked in and out as mind-numbing pleasure coursed through me, so intense I couldn't do more than lie there and make nonsensical sounds.

When His hand curled round my throat and He used the grip to pull me upright, my hole spasmed around His tunnelling cock, making Him grunt.

"Nothing should feel this good," He snarled in my ear, His hot breaths panting over my neck. "It's not fair that you both get this when I don't."

I couldn't fully process the fact that a *demon* who made Theo kill people was talking about what was *fair*. I couldn't fully process anything, completely lost to the brutal pleasure He was inflicting on my body.

The hand around my throat tightened as the other dropped and engulfed my tight sac. He squeezed hard enough to hurt, making me choke out a desperate moan, before sliding His hand up my straining cock.

He groaned, sinking His teeth into my shoulder as He simultaneously pumped my dick and tightened His grip on my throat, slowly cutting off my air. My eyes flashed open, staring up at the darkening sky until my vision wavered. I tipped my head back onto His shoulder as my hips started to jerk, numbing bliss spreading through my ass, lifting my balls and racing up to the tip of my cock.

The shout that left me was raw and painful as I started to come, pinned against His big body, unable to move. My vision whited out entirely, even though He had released my throat to let me suck in air. I sobbed with pleasure, tears pricking at my eyes from the overwhelming intensity of it. It felt like my insides were getting sucked out of me, like He was taking everything from me and I'd be left as nothing more than a husk when it ended.

His fingers slid through the cum dangling from the tip of my cock, and then He was raising His hand and smearing it over my cheek before licking it off. He snarled against my jaw, hips jerking unsteadily again until He sank His teeth into my neck and shouted hoarsely against my skin.

His second orgasm seemed just as intense as His first, but His cock was still rock hard when it ended and He slowly slid from my body. Shockingly gentle hands urged me back down onto the grass, and then He was snuffling His way down my spine, licking and breathing in my scent.

I shouted in shock when He lapped at my leaking hole. He groaned mindlessly, licking and curling His tongue inside, burying His mouth against me as tightly as possible.

“F-f-fuck,” I gasped out, hips twitching with oversensitivity.

I was suddenly flipped onto my back and my softening cock was enveloped in wet heat. I flinched, hands shooting down and scrabbling over His hair, trying to tug His head away.

“T-too—I can’t—” I panted weakly.

He growled, making me flinch again, before slowly sucking up and off my cock. He licked His lips as He raised His head to stare at me in the dying light, white pupils shining eerily. He dipped His head again, making me tense, but all He did was nuzzle my hip. Then my quivering stomach. He slowly made His way up my body, snuffling at my skin, tongue lapping to taste me. He pulled down the lace bra to tug at a nipple with His teeth before burying His nose in my armpit, huffing up the scent of my fresh sweat.

“Mine,” He grunted, scenting my neck, trailing His nose through my sweat-damp hair. “You’re both mine. I’ll have each of you like this.”

I shuddered, barely able to comprehend His words as I panted weakly, limp on the ground. He gathered me into His arms and stood, cradling me to His big body with shocking tenderness as He turned to walk back to the house.

CHAPTER

FORTY-FIVE

He carried me upstairs to the bathroom and gently set me on my feet before fumbling with the bath taps, working out how to get the temperature of the water right. I stood there shivering, watching as He selected my favourite bubble bath from the neat row of bottles lining the edge of the tub, pouring too much in and causing a mountain of bubbles to start frothing up.

After stripping off the bra and ruined robe, He picked me back up and lowered me into the tub, then left the room without saying a word. I sat there, staring at the grass stains on my knees until I lifted my eyes and caught my wavy reflection in the chrome bath taps.

My hair was a wild mess, grass and dirt smeared over my cheek from where it had been pressed to the ground. My eyes were big burning holes in my face, but my skin was still faintly flushed. My body was singing with aftershocks of pleasure. Slowly, I smiled, and in the reflection it looked sharp and distorted.

I could hear Him downstairs somewhere, but I didn't know what He was doing. Once the bath was full enough, I turned off the tap and relaxed back, my eyes slipping shut as the hot water enveloped my sore muscles. Fragrant bubbles tickled my chin, so I dunked my head and slicked back my hair under the water. Sitting up, I reached for my cleanser to get the grass stains off my cheek.

He sauntered back into the bathroom clutching a bottle of wine from the cellar and Theo's cigarettes and lighter. His eyes flared as they roamed over

me in the bath, and when He saw me watching Him, He smirked before raising the bottle and tugging the cork out with His teeth.

Tipping His head back, he gulped down half the bottle without pause, His throat bobbing with every long swallow. Pulling back with a sated gasp, He placed the bottle beside the tub and climbed in at the opposite end, our legs tangling in the middle.

He watched in fascination as I washed my face, slowly opening the cigarette packet in His hand and pulling out a cigarette to clasp it between long, tattooed fingers. He brought it to His mouth and lit it, eyes still fixed on my face.

As He took His first deep drag, His head tipped back against the lip of the tub. He exhaled noisily, mouth stretching into a wide grin as He propped up His elbow and eyed the cigarette.

"I can see why he enjoys these," He said in His gravelly voice, lifting His head to grin at me. "I can feel the poison."

Worry for Theo crept in, making my eyes dart to the cigarette as He brought it back to His mouth. "Theo said he—he can't get sick. Because of his pact with you. Is that true?"

"Yes, that's true," He drawled, tapping ash carelessly onto the floor as I sagged with relief.

He leaned over to snag the bottle, eyeing me as He gulped more wine before slowly pulling the bottle away from His lips and looking down at it. Then He held it out to me, His movements suddenly stilted as if it was unnatural for Him to offer anything of His. For Him to share.

I shook my head, giving Him a tiny smile. "I'm okay."

"What do you want, bloom?" His toes slid up my sensitive inner thigh, making me jerk. "Tell me and I will get it for you."

I swallowed, my mouth dry. "Um, I could use some water."

"Water," He repeated flatly, then dropped His gaze to the bath and gestured with the cigarette. "We are sitting in water, Ari."

I snorted out a tiny laugh. "I can't drink bath water."

He stared at me curiously for a second, before His mouth slowly tilted into a little smile, almost like simple humour was new to Him.

"I'll get some when we get out of the bath," I told Him. "It's fine."

"*I* will get it for you," He rasped, leaning over the side of the tub again to put down the bottle and stub His cigarette out on the tiles.

Then He sat forward, grabbing one of my legs and lifting it out of the water. He began cleaning the grass stains from my knee, staring in fascination at His hands roaming over my skin.

I watched Him carefully, noting the relaxed slope of His shoulders, the satiation in His heavy gaze as He watched His hands on me.

Clearing my throat, I hesitantly said, "You never answered me earlier. When I asked if you would stop making Theo kill people for you."

I went tense, expecting to see His face twist with rage. Instead, He let out a huff of amusement and lifted my other knee to start cleaning it.

"No. He needs to do it. As payment."

"B-but he already gave you"—I gulped—"his soul as payment. Isn't that enough?"

He snorted derisively. "What am I supposed to do with a soul? An intangible thing that gives me nothing except the ability to inhabit this body, but only when he *allows* it." He sneered the last part, clearly unhappy about that fact.

Sitting back, He propped His head in His hand and watched me steadily. "His sacrifices give me strength. Give me power. Allow me to give him all of this"—He waved a hand lazily—"in return. Which was what he wanted."

"But—but he has all of this now," I said desperately. "He doesn't need more. What if he—If he stopped doing it, would you leave him alone? Would the pact be broken?"

He stared at me. Slowly, His mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "Is that what he told you, sweet Ari? That he wants me to leave him alone?"

I shifted uncomfortably. No, Theo had never actually said that he didn't want his demon. In fact, it… it seemed the opposite. It had seemed like Theo *longed* for Him.

"He doesn't want me to leave," He purred, clasping my foot under the water and sliding His thumbs over the arch. "He worships me. I am his god.

"And no," He added, lifting my foot from the water and staring with fascination as His fingers slid between my toes. "If he stopped killing for me, it would drive him mad. *I* would drive him mad. It wouldn't send me away. The pact can never be broken. He is mine, for as long as he is alive."

He smirked at me, bringing my foot to His mouth and kissing the ball of it. I twitched as His beard tickled my sole.

"And he will be alive for a very long time," He murmured, white pupils flashing as His expression turned sly. "You can be too, bloom, if you let me

in. You can stay with us forever."

My breath caught. I stared at Him, trying not to get distracted as He trailed kisses down the arch of my foot. It was making my cock twitch again.

"What—what do you mean, let you in?" I flushed. "Didn't I just… do that?"

He chuckled, finally releasing my foot and lounging back again, thick thighs spreading wide to frame my legs.

"Not in that way, bloom." He smirked at me, then shrugged a shoulder before reaching for the wine bottle again. "Make a pact with me, and I will give you everything I have given him."

I choked on a breath, shaking my head immediately. "I can't kill people."

"You wouldn't have to," He drawled, watching me closely. "In this, I will show mercy. Our pact would be an extension of his. His sacrifices would be for you both."

God, I loathed myself for considering it. Letting Theo kill people for my benefit? It was abhorrent in so many ways.

As if He could see the indecision in my face, He rasped, "You'd never age. Never get sick or weaken. You'd stay just as you are forever. A perfect, flawless bloom."

"I—It would be wrong," I whispered, far too tempted.

"He will still kill for me," He said airily. "Nothing would change, except I could give you all of this, just as I have given him. Anything you ever wanted."

I swallowed, shaking my head. "I don't—I don't care about money."

"The chance to be with him forever, then," He said immediately, knowing exactly what my weaknesses were. "Otherwise he will watch you grow old while never aging himself. Watch you get weak and sick. Watch you die."

My chin wobbled. I didn't want Theo to have to watch me get old and die. I didn't want him to be alone after I was gone, just a demon for company for the rest of his never-ending life.

Water sloshed as He leaned forward, placing a shockingly tender kiss to my trembling mouth.

"Think it over," He murmured slyly. "The offer will be waiting."

I nodded vacantly, staring at the bubbles floating on the water. Sitting back, He picked up my foot again, and my eyelids fluttered when He pressed a tender kiss to the bottom of my big toe before sucking it into His mouth. I gasped, head tipping back as my hands gripped the sides of the tub. I'd never known I was so sensitive there.

My cock rose in the water as He sucked, slid His tongue along my toes, bit down on the arch of my instep. My chest started rising faster as my breaths quickened, my face flushed from the steam and the lust surging back up inside me.

"Every part of you is so perfect," He murmured, sounding drugged. His hand slid up my calf to the sensitive back of my knee, making me loose a shuddering breath.

My head shot up when He drew both my feet down and curled my toes either side of His stiff length in the water. It was so hot and hard, the skin silky as He gripped my feet and used them to stroke His cock.

I stared at the murky outline, heat spreading through my chest and up my throat. He watched me, unblinking, His gaze never wavering from my face as His lip curled into a pleasured snarl, breath hissing out of Him.

"I'm not done with you yet, Ari," He rasped, before releasing my feet and rising up in the bath.

He loomed over me, steam curling from His tanned, tattooed skin, His cock jutting out like an offering. Water splashed as I hurriedly got to my knees, sliding my hands up His thick thighs. I met His inhuman gaze as I ran my tongue up His length, lingering on the piercing at the head.

His knees almost buckled, a snarl escaping Him as He gripped my hair in a tight fist. I moaned, eyelids growing heavy as I sucked Him into my mouth. His hand trembled against my scalp, breath leaving Him in a hard huff.

His head tipped back, the wet ends of His hair sticking to His chest and shoulders. But then He used His grip to tug my mouth free, making me whine. His chest heaved as He gazed down at me.

"Not yet," He rasped, releasing my hair to step out of the bath.

I rose on unsteady legs and climbed out after Him, reaching for my dressing gown. When I passed a towel to Him, He took it but simply stared for a few seconds before dropping it on the floor and striding out of the room.

When I hesitantly crept out of the bathroom in my robe, I saw His big wet footprints leading to the stairs. What was He doing down there?

Panic made me freeze in place. Would He… would He hurt Athena?

I hurried down the stairs and almost slipped on one of His wet footprints when I reached the tiled floor. He was making a lot of noise in the kitchen, but I darted to the sitting room, looking around wildly for Athena.

I sagged with relief when I saw her curled up on the sofa in a deep sleep. Walking to the open back doors, I quietly closed and locked them, then turned to hesitantly make my way to the kitchen.

He was standing at the fridge, shovelling leftover roast pork into His mouth. Another bottle of wine was open on the island next to a half-eaten untoasted bagel and an empty sleeve of cookies. A wheel of brie had been unwrapped, huge bites taken out of it, rind and all. Several orange peels scattered the surface, and the fresh punnet of blueberries that had been in the fridge that morning was now empty.

His head whipped round to gaze at me as He pulled a carton of apple juice out of the fridge and guzzled it.

"Um…" I took a tentative step closer, clutching my robe. "Hungry?"

He lowered the carton with a sated sigh, shooting me a sharp grin. "Experiencing it all while I can."

I nodded, watching as He picked up a little glass dish of the chocolate mousse Theo had made for me earlier and stared down at it. After dipping His finger in, He brought it to His mouth and sucked.

My gut clenched with arousal. "Do—do demons… Do you wish you could have all of this? Food and wine and…"

He stiffened, shoving the dish back in the fridge and slamming it shut.

"No," He snarled defensively. "Of course not. We don't long for the sad little luxuries that make your pathetic human lives even somewhat bearable. We are above it all."

Except it didn't seem that way, as He gorged Himself on food and wine and cigarettes and… me.

"Go back upstairs, bloom," He rasped, voice seductive once again. "I will bring you your water."

Sucking in a shallow breath, I nodded and took a step back. He stayed perfectly still, watching me with unwavering eyes until I obeyed, turning to leave the kitchen.

My legs were unsteady as I made my way back upstairs, cock perking up again beneath my robe. By the time I got into the bedroom and slipped it off, I was fully hard, trying to anticipate what He would do to me when He came back up. Briefly wondering if I should put my pyjamas on, I decided against it, knowing it was pointless. Knowing we weren't done.

After switching on the lamp and climbing onto the bed, I sat up against the headboard and pulled my knees to my chest, toes curling against the covers, my stomach jittery with nervous anticipation. He sauntered in a few minutes later carrying a glass of water, another bottle of wine and a little dish of chocolate mousse.

My stomach squeezed with anticipation as He set it all down on the nightstand. After a pause, He picked the water back up and passed it to me, watching hungrily as I gulped it down.

Once I'd set the glass back down, He knelt on the bed and curled His hands around my ankles. With one forceful tug, He dragged me down until I was flat on my back and my legs were splayed, revealing my hard cock. I started to pant, staring up at Him as He gazed down between my legs.

Without saying a word, He leaned over to grab the wine bottle and tipped His chin back to gulp it down. Then He picked up the little pot of mousse and placed it on my stomach, making me flinch from the contact of the cold glass on my flushed skin.

I stared, wide-eyed as He dipped His fingers in before lifting them to my mouth. I parted my lips automatically, eyes fluttering as I sucked rich dark chocolate off His fingers.

He dipped them in again and smeared it down my throat and over my chest. I panted, staring up at Him as His white pupils flared, trying to stop my hips from straining up off the bed. Moving the pot to the mattress, He leaned down and licked up the chocolate, moaning as He lapped at my throat, down to my chest, circling my nipples with His tongue.

Then He got more and drew a strange, alien symbol on my stomach before licking it off, the tip of His tongue dipping into my navel and making me twitch.

Pressing His chocolate-coated thumb to my hipbone, He murmured, "When you accept my offer, I will leave my mark here."

I lifted my head and stared down at the dark brown thumbprint just above the crease of my groin. Something terrifyingly possessive rose up inside me.

In that moment, I wanted it. I wanted His mark.

My cock jerked on my belly, drawing His gaze. Letting out a huff of amusement, He raised His eyes to meet mine as He dipped His head and licked off the chocolate. Then He trailed His tongue inward until it brushed the side of my shaft.

I whimpered, knees falling open wide and my hips straining up when He sucked my cock into His mouth. He groaned around my length, clawing hands gripping my hips to hold them still when they tried to buck. His pierced tongue wound around the head, hungrily licking up the pre-cum that pulsed out of me.

Panting wildly, I reached down to thread my fingers through His hair. He grunted and lifted His mouth off my cock to shake them free, then snatched up my wrists to pin them together as He lowered His mouth to my balls.

Teeth scraped, making me flinch, before He sucked one into His mouth and moaned roughly. He moved to the other as He drew my hands down and settled them on my inner thighs.

“Spread yourself for me,” He murmured, turning His head to sink His teeth into my thigh beside my trembling fingers.

I gasped in pleasure at the sting of pain, lifting my knees and spreading my thighs so wide I felt the muscles stretch achingly tight. I was spread open as wide as possible, my feet in the air and toes flexing either side of His shoulders.

He grunted in approval, reaching down to stroke His stiff cock as He lowered His head and lapped at my taint, nuzzling my balls. I shuddered, choking on a breath when the tip of His tongue slid lower to circle my hole. It was still slightly relaxed from before, allowing Him to slip His tongue in easily.

He moaned against me, arm flexing rapidly as He pumped His cock. His tongue felt abnormally flat and wide as He laved it over my sac and up the length of my dick before sucking me back into His mouth.

A finger slipped inside me as His head bobbed, hungry slurping sounds filling the room. I was shaking wildly, my fingers almost losing their grip on my spread thighs, the position not allowing me to strain my hips up like they wanted to. I moaned with every hectic breath, the knot of pleasure getting tighter and tighter, clenching up my stomach, making my toes curl in the air.

I cried out when the orgasm exploded through me, shoulders lifting off the bed as my body tried to curl inward. He moaned hoarsely around my cock, sucking hard, hungrily swallowing every spurt of cum.

My nuts ached when it ended, milked dry. My legs fell onto the bed when I released them and collapsed, splayed carelessly. He rose up over me, clumsily straddling my waist as His fist flew over His cock. His face was twisted into a snarl of pleasure, lip curling, white pupils fixed on me with overwhelming intensity.

His hips jerked, fingers clenching His cock tighter, and then He was coming all over my chest and stomach, painting my skin with long lines of cum that were almost unbearably hot. His head tipped back, a long, shuddering moan tearing from Him before the tension left His body and He sagged, pinning my hips to the bed with His weight.

My throat clicked when I swallowed, still panting weakly as I tried to recover from the mind-numbing pleasure. He clasped my face and leaned down, giving me a tender kiss.

“My sweet bloom,” He crooned against my mouth. “I cannot wait for you to join us.”

CHAPTER

FORTY-SIX

Even though I was completely fucked out, I dozed fitfully, very aware that it wasn't Theo lying beside me in bed. The demon had treated me well, but I wanted Theo back. I missed him.

Every time I woke up in the night, He was just lying beside me. Staring. His pupils never wavered from my face, glowing white in the dark. It was disturbing, but it didn't make me afraid.

Twice more in the night when I blinked open my eyes sleepily, He coaxed me fully awake with seductive words and licking kisses over my neck and chest. Once to lift me up onto His face and feed my cock into His mouth, and again to climb between my legs and fuck me like an animal. Nothing came out of me that last time except for a weak trickle of cum as I sobbed in pleasure against His shoulder.

When I woke up in the morning, my body ached in the best way. My hole was sore, my skin sticky with dried cum and the remnants of the mousse He'd smeared all over me.

As I rolled over in bed, I could tell He was gone. Theo's eyes were closed. His skin was pale, stark against the deep cobalt of his beard.

I knew I should let him sleep—his body had been worked as hard as mine had, if not harder—but I had to see his deep brown eyes, to know he was back. And that he was definitely okay with everything that had happened.

I flushed, wondering what he thought. Licking my lips nervously, I reached out and palmed his cheek, running my fingers gently through the bristles of his beard.

“Theo,” I whispered, shuffling closer. I pressed my face to his throat and breathed in his scent, my eyes slipping shut. He—the demon—had smelled like hot steam, burning wood, heated earth. Theo’s scent was still warm, but softer and less overbearing. Like the remnants of a bonfire after a sunny day.

My eyes flashed open when I felt him shift. He let out a shaky groan, his hand trembling finely as it landed heavily on my waist and slid up.

Pulling back, I saw his eyes blink open blearily. My body sagged with relief when his deep brown eyes looked back at me, bloodshot and tired, but his.

“Are you okay?” I whispered, running my fingers through his chest hair.

He swallowed, face turning slightly green-grey. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

I sat up quickly as he clambered unsteadily out of bed and stumbled to the door. I hurried to get up, wincing when I heard him retching and vomiting into the toilet bowl. Making my way into the bathroom, I knelt beside him and smoothed a hand down his trembling back.

“He—He ate a lot,” I said anxiously, pushing back Theo’s hair as he heaved and threw up again. “And… drank a lot of wine.”

“Yeah,” Theo croaked, spitting into the toilet bowl before resting shakily on his hip. “I know.”

That made my stomach twist with nerves. He knew everything that had happened. He’d been there. He’d been part of it. The thought simultaneously comforted me and made me anxious. But then… Theo had said he would put a stop to anything either of us wasn’t comfortable with. And he hadn’t stopped anything.

Grabbing a square of tissue, I gently wiped his beard. He grimaced. “Sorry, dimples.”

I smiled hearing him call me that, shaking my head and slowly helping him stand. “Don’t be silly.”

He leaned heavily against the counter as he brushed his teeth and drank deeply from the tap, then stumbled to the shower and turned it on before sitting down under the spray. He could barely hold his head up, so I got in with him and carefully washed his hair, scrubbed at his face and beard, gently cleaned his body.

After quickly scrubbing myself down, I turned off the shower and helped him out, then dried him with a towel. His knees buckled with every

other step as I led him back to the bedroom. I tucked him under sheets that smelled like steam and smoke and warm bodies, sitting beside him and smoothing his hair back until he dropped quickly into sleep.

I sat there for a few more minutes, watching him. He looked simultaneously younger and older, his face drawn and pale, but softer in sleep. His breaths were shallow at first, body still quaking lightly under the covers, before he relaxed with a drawn-out exhale and dropped into deep unconsciousness.

Standing up, I got dressed and plaited back my wet hair, slathering on moisturiser and sunscreen. It felt surreal to be getting ready for the day like I normally did after I'd spent the night fucking a demon. But this was what our lives had become, and everything else couldn't grind to a halt because of it.

Heading downstairs, I gave Athena a big fuss before letting her out. She bounded out into the garden cheerfully, none the wiser that her master had been possessed by a demon all night. He had seemed to just ignore her while He was here, but then He'd been busy gorging Himself on everything He couldn't partake in in His usual form. Food. Wine. Textures and tastes and smells. Me.

I headed into the kitchen and cringed at the mess He'd left it in. Empty wine bottles and food packets and crumbs littered the surface. At least He'd remembered to close the fridge after raiding it. I found myself smiling affectionately at the memory of finding Him down here, stuffing His face hungrily, guzzling down wine and juice. But then it turned into a grimace. Poor Theo was going to feel rough for a while. Hopefully he slept through the worst of it.

I made coffee, leaving it to brew as I put down Athena's breakfast for when she came back in, then started cleaning up His mess. The familiar motions soothed me. Loading the dishwasher, throwing away the rubbish, rinsing out the empty wine bottles and wiping down the surfaces.

As I worked, my mind drifted to the offer He'd made me, making my gut clench with foreboding and longing.

The chance to be with Theo forever. To stay young and never get ill. I was tempted. Of course I was. Who wouldn't be? And He'd said that nothing would change. I wouldn't have to kill anyone, and Theo would still have to kill people for his pact with Him anyway, there was no getting out of it.

But I'd still be… benefitting from the murder of innocent people. Not that I knew they were all innocent, but I very much doubted He was using His pact with Theo to be some… skewed justice-seeking vigilante for humankind.

My mind was still churning when I sat down at the island with a cup of coffee, sipping it slowly. Athena wandered in and made a beeline for her breakfast, and I listened absently to her wolfing it down as I sat there in silence. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, warming my face.

My body was calm. There was no tightness in my chest, no tension in my limbs. I wondered if I should feel guilty, but I didn't. Theo had been a part of it. Theo had allowed it just as I had.

And I suspected that Theo wanted the demon in the same way that I did. I'd seen the longing in his eyes. Heard the reverence in his voice when he spoke about Him.

Had they ever… fucked before, like we had? I assumed not, if He needed to inhabit a body to do it. He'd said His form had no outlet for lust, so I was guessing that meant He had no genitalia, and besides, Theo had said He couldn't truly touch anyone in His true form.

And the only body He could inhabit was Theo's. I found myself wondering, if I agreed to His pact, would He be able to possess *me?* Would I be able to give Theo… what he'd given me? A chance to be with Him physically. A chance for them to sate each other's lust.

I shivered, imagining it. Maybe I should have felt jealous over the idea, but I didn't. How could I, after Theo had selflessly given up control of his body to allow me to experience that very same thing?

The idea only made me feel lust, even though the thought of letting a demon possess me was obviously terrifying. What did it feel like? Theo had said he'd be able to experience everything, feel it all as it was happening. Hear everything that was said.

Draining the last of my coffee, I put the cup in the dishwasher and left the kitchen. I went back upstairs and quietly cleaned the bathroom, scrubbing the bath and throwing away the stubbed-out cigarette He'd left on the tiles. I took Theo's cigarette packet and lighter into the bedroom, leaving it next to the ashtray on the little table between the two armchairs. He was still sleeping peacefully, an unmoving lump under the covers, his steady breaths comforting me.

Once I started cleaning, I didn't stop. I cleaned the whole house, letting the satisfying, repetitive motions soothe me. I didn't know if I was subconsciously scrubbing away any traces of Him. I didn't regret anything that had happened, but I was glad it was just us again.

Not that He was gone. He was still here somewhere, down in the cellar or lurking in the shadows. But He stayed quiet, seemingly satisfied to leave me alone now that He'd gotten what He wanted.

Would He want it again? I did, I realised with a bout of nervous excitement that made my stomach flutter. I wanted to feel that raw, carnal need from Him again. I wanted to give myself over to Him completely again, letting Him sate Himself on my body.

I wanted Him to possess me, in whatever way that meant.

I wanted His mark.

CHAPTER

FORTY-SEVEN

Theo slept for the entire day. It was dusk when he finally woke, just as I was coming into the bedroom to change into my pyjamas after taking Athena for a long walk.

I was buttoning up my pyjama top when he stirred in the bed, groaning as he rolled onto his back and scrubbed his hands over his face. I hurried over, sitting beside him and smoothing strands of his messy hair back from his forehead.

"Hi." I tracked my gaze worriedly over his face, but he looked better. His skin was no longer pale and his eyes weren't tight with pain. "How are you feeling?"

He nodded tiredly in answer, tugging the covers from under me and lifting them so I could curl up into his side. He wrapped his arms around me tight, letting out a long sigh as I rested my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice croaky and rumbling under my cheek.

"I'm fine." I kissed his chest then settled my cheek there again, chuckling as I fiddled absently with the bar through his nipple. "I cleaned the whole house while you were asleep. Took me all day."

"You didn't have to do that." He kissed the top of my head then yawned so wide his jaw cracked, which set me off too.

"I'm tired though." I shifted my head higher onto the pillow, and Theo turned onto his side to face me, cupping my neck and rubbing his thumb along my jaw. "I didn't sleep well without you."

"I was here," he told me calmly. "I was here for all of it."

We stared at each other in silence, everything that had happened going unspoken between us.

Until Theo licked his lips, dropping his gaze to my mouth.

"What… what was it like?" he whispered. "Being with Him like that."

When he raised his eyes to meet mine again, I could see it. It wasn't anger, or jealousy but… envy. Longing.

I swallowed, my stomach twisting into a knot of pleasure as all the erotic memories flitted through my mind. "It was… intense."

"You enjoyed it, right?" Theo's brows pinched with concern. "You didn't say your safeword, and I know how you… But I also know that He can be… a lot."

There was still absolutely no anger or jealousy in Theo's voice or face, but I was still nervous when I admitted, "Yes. I enjoyed it."

He exhaled in relief, then pursed his lips and dropped his gaze again. "Not that I know what He's like when He's…"

So they hadn't ever fucked then, just as I'd assumed.

Theo sighed and rolled onto his back, scrubbing a hand through his beard. When he smacked his lips and grimaced, I jumped up from the bed.

"I'll go get you some water." I paused at the door. "Do you want anything to eat?"

Theo groaned, shaking his head. "I don't think I'll be able to handle food for a while."

I laughed, raising a teasing brow at him. "He finally filled the bottomless pit that is your stomach."

Theo huffed in amusement, slowly sitting up to lean back against the headboard. I hurried downstairs to get him a big glass of ice water, and by the time I came back up he'd retrieved his cigarettes and the ashtray from the little table. He didn't normally smoke in bed because he knew I didn't like it, but I decided to let him off this time.

He accepted the glass of water with a grateful 'thanks' and gulped it down. When I took the empty glass off him, he stuck a cigarette between his lips and lit it, head tipping back against the headboard as he took his first deep drag.

"Doesn't that make you feel worse?" I asked, settling cross-legged by his feet. "You must be feeling at least a little hungover still. He drank, like, three bottles of wine. At least."

Theo's lips quirked. "Yes and no. Tastes like shit, but… feels good."

I watched him bring the cigarette back up to his mouth, the end crackling as he inhaled. I'd never smoked in my life. Never taken drugs. Not for any particular reason—people could make their own decisions, and I didn't judge them for it. I'd just never had any interest.

But I found myself asking, "Can I try it?"

Theo lifted his head to look at me sharply, brows drawing into a frown. "It's not good for you, Ari."

That made me raise my brows at him, and he huffed, tapping the ash into the heavy glass ashtray resting on his stomach. "I can't get sick."

"I just want to try it. I've never smoked before." I felt a little juvenile, my cheeks flushing. "I doubt I'll even like it."

Theo sighed, reluctantly holding the cigarette out to me. "I really hope you hate it."

I took it carefully and clasped it awkwardly between two fingers. Bringing it to my mouth, I took a short drag and immediately spluttered out a cloud of grey smoke, the back of my throat burning.

Theo chuckled. "You have to take it back."

"Huh?" I coughed out, my face hot with embarrassment.

"You have to inhale, dimples." He grinned at me. "Draw it into your lungs."

Still pink in the face, I tried again, and this time it was smoother as I inhaled the smoke into my lungs, though my throat still burned. I grimaced, the taste in my mouth awful. The demon had been right—I could feel the poison seeping into me.

"I don't think I like it," I said, coughing a little again when I blew out a stream of smoke.

Theo chuckled. "Good."

But I stared down at the cigarette in my hand, and found myself taking another drag before passing it back to him.

"The…" I licked my lips, and they tasted savoury from the cigarette in an unpleasant way. "He offered to make a pact with me."

Theo was quiet as he took a drag of the cigarette. Smoke curled from his mouth and nostrils when he said, "I know," watching me carefully.

I watched him back, then lay down curled up on my side and clasped his foot through the covers. "What do you think?"

Theo frowned, shaking his head. "It's not up to me."

“But it… it affects you,” I mumbled, watching my fingers trace over his toes under the cover. “If I don’t—You’ll have to watch me get old. And die.”

He flinched, face crumpling with grief for a second before he schooled his expression with effort. “You shouldn’t do it for me, Ari.”

I huffed. “Of course I’d be doing it for you.”

He shook his head. “Then you shouldn’t do it.”

When I didn’t say anything, he sighed and rubbed his eyes with a finger and thumb. “I know it’s tempting, Ari. Trust me, I know. I know He made it sound like it would be easy and perfect. But you’d still be tying yourself to a demon.”

I swallowed nervously. “What—what would that mean? For my… soul?”

“I’m probably the wrong person to ask.” Theo frowned again and took a drag of the cigarette. “I don’t believe in any kind of afterlife. That’s why it was so easy for me to make a pact with Him.”

“But if demons exist… wouldn’t that mean that other things exist? God, or…”

He shrugged, stubbing out the cigarette and immediately lighting another, his movements stiff like the conversation made him uncomfortable. “I personally think demons are more of a manifestation of all the bad shit in the world. All the chaos and sadness and evil, fucked up things that people do of their own free will. I think they’re something other, but not necessarily religious.”

“But He—He *makes* you do those fucked up things,” I whispered.

Theo sighed, staring at the ashtray on his lap. “He does,” he agreed. “But I still do them of my own free will. I still agreed to it. It’s like a… self-perpetuating cycle.”

We fell quiet, and I watched my fingers draw absentminded patterns on the bed spread before I eventually held out my hand for the cigarette. When Theo sighed and passed it to me, I rolled onto my back as I inhaled toxic smoke and stared up at the straps and chains across the canopy of the bed. We used them often, Theo tying me up whenever I asked for it. Stretching my arms out to the bedposts, or binding my wrists together above my head so I was balanced precariously on my knees, totally at his mercy.

My belly tightened with arousal. Would… would the demon want to do that?

"I think…" I heard myself say after a while. "I think I want to do it."

Theo went very still, and when I glanced over at him he was staring at me with an expression of pure longing. But then his brows pinched, and he looked down. "I told you, Ari, you… you shouldn't do it for me."

"Not just for you," I said quickly. "Though that's a big part of it. I don't want to leave you. But I… The chance to stay young forever. To never get sick and die. It's… tempting," I whispered.

"I know it is, dimples," Theo said hoarsely. "And I know He said nothing would change—that you wouldn't have to… make sacrifices for Him. But it's still a… life-altering decision. Everyone else you know would eventually be gone. You'd probably have to cut contact with them at some point anyway, because you wouldn't be able to explain why you don't age."

My gut cramped with unease. Honestly, there weren't that many people in my life that I cared about. My mummo was already gone, and it may have sounded callous, but it wouldn't be much of a hardship to cut my mother out completely. Edel and Amir, though… that would hurt.

"How long would I still be able to have with them?" I asked hoarsely.

Theo bobbed his head. "Maybe ten years, fifteen at the most before it would get too suspicious."

Ten to fifteen years. That felt like a long time away. And by then, we'd all be at different phases in our lives. They may even have kids, or have moved away, or…

And they were my friends, but Theo was my *partner*. My *life* partner. Shouldn't my decision be based more on him than them?

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to push it all to the back of my mind. I didn't have to make a decision right this second. I didn't even have to make it this year, or this decade. It wasn't like Theo's demon was going anywhere.

"I won't make any rash decisions," I told him with a smile. "I'll think about it. He only made the offer last night."

"Okay, dimples," Theo said quietly. "Think about it."

He looked tense again. Figuring he could probably do without any more heavy conversations for a while, I shot him a teasing smile as I rolled onto my stomach and passed the cigarette back to him.

"So, Bluebeard," I said, my eyes drifting down to his electric blue beard as he smiled around the cigarette butt. "Why the beard? And the piercings

and tattoos? Shouldn't you be doing everything in your power to fly under the radar?"

Theo shrugged carelessly and took another deep drag before tapping the ash off into the tray. "Haven't been caught yet."

There was an edge of cockiness in his voice, despite how nonchalant he seemed. And I was sick, because it made my stomach clench with want.

"You almost were though," I said sternly, unable to believe I was discussing murder so casually with him. Unable to believe how quickly it had just… become a facet of our life together.

"Yeah," he mused with a huff. "They couldn't find anything though. I've been doing this for a long time. That one was… a little sloppy. He hadn't fed in a while, and He was getting impatient."

I licked my lips. "So you do it on purpose? The beard and piercings, I mean. Hiding in plain sight?"

He shrugged again, his dark eyes cutting to me. A tiny smirk curved one corner of his lips. "Seeing how long I can get away with it, I guess."

My cock twitched against the mattress, making heat rise in my cheeks. I was lusting after a man who was possessed by a demon, murdered people and got off on taunting the police about it without them even realising.

Clearing my throat, I held out my hand for the cigarette and gave Theo a tiny smile when he passed it over.

"So the beard isn't a mark of possession or something?" I asked dryly. "Are my pubes gonna turn blue if I make a pact with Him?"

I wanted to preen when Theo chuckled. He moved the ashtray to the nightstand and sat up with a grunt to lean forward, running his fingers through my hair as I took a small drag of the cigarette.

"That'd be hot," he murmured against my cheek, making me smile as I exhaled a stream of smoke. "And no, but you should do it anyway."

I laughed. Plucking the cigarette from between my fingers, Theo leaned back to stub it out in the ashtray. Then he reached over and gripped my ankle, tugging me up the bed. Squawking through another laugh, I let him drag me closer until he loomed over me on straightened arms.

"You want me to dye my pubes blue?" I raked my fingers through his beard. His eyes darkened with pleasure when I scratched at his chin and jaw.

"Doesn't have to be blue." He dipped his head to kiss me, then continued lower, trailing his lips down my throat to my collarbone.

I sighed in bliss, my eyes slipping shut as I luxuriated in the feel of his familiar kisses. But I definitely couldn't have sex again so soon. My body needed a break, and I was pretty sure Theo's did too.

He seemed the feel the same, because after one final kiss to the centre of my chest, he rested his weight on top of me and buried his face in my neck with a sigh. I ran my fingers through his hair before gently urging his head back up.

"Are you sure you don't want to eat anything?" I asked. "I can cook for *you* for once."

He smiled. "I appreciate the offer, dimples, but I'm not going to want food for a while."

"Well, *I* do." I gave him a teasing smile, but my insides fluttered with nerves at what I said next, part of me wondering if it would be a step too far. "I had a pretty energetic night."

But Theo's eyes darkened with lust, his head dipping to kiss me. "Fuck yes, you did."

Pulling back, he ran a hand down my side and squeezed my backside when I curled my leg around his waist.

"Are you sore?" he asked, his gaze flitting between concern and dark arousal. I chuckled.

"Yes, of course I am." I wrapped my arms around his neck and slyly added, "But in a good way. In the way you know I like."

"Mm." Giving me one final kiss, he sat up with a groan and pushed his hair back from his face. "I'll make you something to eat."

"I can do it," I protested immediately, standing up from the bed and stretching.

I wrinkled my nose as the smell of smoke wafted up from my pyjamas. My mouth tasted awful, and the scent was acrid and too strong—nothing like how it smelled on Theo, which was warm and comforting.

"You'll be pleased to know that I am definitely not going to start smoking," I told him as he struggled into his shorts, which I'd picked up from the floor earlier and folded neatly.

He chuckled, grabbing a hairband to tie his hair back in a haphazard bun. "Good. And I want to cook for you, dimples. It'll make me feel normal again."

"Well, I'll help," I insisted as we left the bedroom and headed for the stairs.

When we reached the bottom, Theo wrapped his arm around my shoulders and started leading me to the kitchen.

"The mousse was good though, right?" he asked in a low voice, looking down at me with a smirk as we passed the cellar door.

I shivered at the memory, tucking myself tighter into Theo's body as my mouth tipped up.

"Yeah." I grinned back at him. "It was good."

CHAPTER

FORTY-EIGHT

Life returned to normal.

We went to work. We took Athena for long walks and lounged by the pool at the weekends. We had dinner with Edel and Amir at their flat, taking them a bottle of good wine and a plant as housewarming gifts, even though Amir had already been living there with his brother for years.

After giving our bodies a break for a few days, we started having sex again. And once we started, we couldn't stop. We were as hungry for each other as we had been at the very beginning, when it was all new and overwhelmingly exhilarating.

But it wasn't just carnal need. It was more like a reconfirmation of our relationship, of how much we loved each other. I basked in the feel of being joined with him so intimately, soaking up his love and need for me, and giving it back just as intensely.

I couldn't ever leave him. I knew that without a doubt. I couldn't make him watch me get sick or old and eventually die, leaving him without me for the rest of his long life. If I imagined it reversed, the thought made me feel sick. Made me grieve for him when he wasn't even gone.

I hadn't really let myself think about what it would mean—living forever. Indefinitely. That was too much for my brain to handle, so I focused on the immediate positives, even though it felt horribly shallow.

But surely anyone would be tempted by the promise of eternal youth and unbroken health. One night after a bath, I sat at the dressing table and stared at myself in the mirror. Theo had told me he'd always been vain, and I supposed I was too. I knew I was good-looking—beautiful, I'd been told many times in my life. I looked after my skin and my hair. I dressed well in

the style I knew suited me. I loved how I looked in dresses and sexy lingerie and nothing at all.

Was vanity really so bad? It didn't hurt anyone. Maybe I was more like my narcissistic mother than I'd thought, except her self-obsession *had* hurt me. She'd been unloving and distant when I was a child, completely uninterested in every aspect of my life because they weren't things that benefitted *her*.

Except for any of my boyfriends who she'd met and flirted with shamelessly, telling me when I confronted her about it that it was just a bit of fun.

No. I wasn't like her. I was kind to people, and generous, both traits I attributed to my mummo and not her daughter. The summers and Christmases I'd spent with her in Finland had shaped me as a person better than anything my mother did or didn't do when I was a child. I'd grown up determined to emulate my mummo, who everyone loved, who had been warm and protective. Not my mother.

I hoped my mummo would be proud of me if she was still here. I hoped she wouldn't hate me for the decision I was about to make.

Because I wanted His mark. I wanted to make a pact with Him.

I had decided to tell Theo on a Saturday evening, when I knew I wouldn't have work for two days. If the demon had wiped him out for a whole day when he was used to it, I didn't know how long I'd take to recover if I let Him possess me.

I wasn't going into this unprepared. I had a list of demands I was going to make, and if He refused, I would barter with Him. I knew I had power here. I knew He wanted me with almost disturbing intensity.

And my demands weren't excessive. It wasn't even a long list. I thought they were all reasonable, but then again, I wasn't a selfish, possessive demon who devoured people and revelled in blood and death and chaos.

It had been about a month since my night with the demon, and summer was drawing to a close. The days were getting shorter, the air turning cold and damp as the evenings drew in. The summer flowers all began to die off in the garden, leaves thinning on the trees.

I was already excitedly anticipating autumn and winter here. Watching the leaves change colour, seeing what popped up in the garden over the colder months. Maybe we'd even get snow, not that it was ever a sure thing in England. But I could imagine the patio and lawn covered in a thick,

fluffy blanket of white, sparkling in the winter sun, Athena bounding through it and leaving her paw prints behind.

I imagined a big, lit up tree in the front hall, and another in the sitting room. *Real* trees, not plastic ones, covered in red and gold and forest green, strewn with twinkling fairy lights. We could have Edel and Amir over for dinner in the run-up to Christmas, and on the actual day it would be just us, Theo cooking a big dinner in the kitchen before we took Athena for a long walk with full bellies and cheeks flushed from too much champagne.

I wanted all of it with Theo. All the days and nights, all the holidays and celebrations. All the milestones of our lives and the wonderful mundanity in between. Lazy Sundays in bed. Evenings spent lounging in front of the TV, cuddled together. Soul-soothing dinners after a long day at work and sleepy breakfasts where we didn't need to fill the easy silence. I wanted to have them all with him for as long as I could.

I pushed back the dressing table chair and stood, smoothing down my pyjama top, my palms slightly damp with nerves. I was about to leave the room to find Theo when I heard him coming up the stairs, so instead I sat on the edge of the bed and waited, chewing anxiously on my thumbnail.

He paused in the doorway when he saw me, before taking a hesitant step inside. His brows furrowed as he tracked his gaze over me. "You okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine," I assured him as he slowly came and sat beside me on the bed. Turning to face him, I took his hand in both of mine and let out a steadying breath. "I'm ready. I want to do it."

He froze. I had no doubt that he already knew what I was referring to. Slowly curling his fingers around mine, he swallowed and croaked, "Don't you want to take more time to think about it?"

I could hear the poorly masked longing in his voice. The weak, fearful hope that he wouldn't have to lose me. Wouldn't have to watch me get old and die.

He hadn't pushed me one way or another. He hadn't even mentioned it after the morning we discussed it. I knew he didn't want to influence my decision by trying to coax me into it, but I also knew that he didn't want to lose me. He loved me as intensely as I loved him.

I shook my head. "I don't need more time. My answer isn't going to change. I love you, Theo. I want to stay with you for as long as I possibly can."

His mouth trembled in the depths of his blue beard, eyes going glassy. When he reached up and cupped my face, his hand was shaking. “Ari.”

“And I…” My throat bobbed with nerves, but I forced myself to hold his gaze. “I want to give you what you gave me. With Him.”

Theo’s breath caught, hand slipping off my face in shock. His dark eyes grew wide as he stared at me, desperate longing bleeding into them.

“Really?” he whispered.

I nodded, giving him a tiny, reassuring smile as I cupped his face in my hands. “Yes.”

“Don’t you—You don’t mind?”

I frowned at the question. “It wouldn’t be very fair if I did. But I don’t—I promise I don’t, Theo. I can tell that you… need Him. And I can also tell that He wants you just as badly.”

A blush spread over Theo’s cheeks at that, making me melt and lean in to kiss his warmed skin. He shuddered, before turning his head sharply and capturing my lips in a bruising kiss. Fingers slid into my hair, gripping the strands and holding me close when he pulled back.

“Th-thank you,” he croaked. “I…”

He swallowed and kissed me again, mouth fervent, tongue eager as it thrust into my mouth.

“I get to keep you.” His voice hitched, wobbly with emotion. I smiled wide.

“You get to keep me,” I agreed, then dipped my head to kiss his neck and added slyly, “Just like this.”

He let out a sobbing laugh, hands sliding down my neck, over my shoulders, like he wanted to touch every inch of me.

“I’d still want you just as much even if you became an old man.” He swallowed thickly, and his eyes were wet when he lifted them to meet mine. “You don’t have to do this for me, Ari. I’d still always love you. I’d still stay with you until the end.”

“I know,” I said calmly, even though my belly was churning with nerves. “And it’s not just for you. It’s for me too. I want to.”

“Are you sure?” His voice shook, eyes searching mine. “What about your family? And Edel and Amir?”

My mouth twisted. “The only family I have is my mother and an aunt and uncle I’ve hardly ever met. A few cousins I haven’t seen since I was little. And my mother probably wouldn’t even notice that nothing had

changed about me." I snorted without humour. "Except to maybe get jealous that I looked better than her."

He exhaled. "Okay, but what about Edel and Amir? I know how much you care about them. Love them."

"I do," I said hoarsely. "And I'll miss them when we eventually have to stop seeing them. But we have time before that, don't we?" I gave him a wobbly smile. "That's all anyone can ever do—enjoy the time they have with someone while they have it. Well, except us. We'll have all the time."

Theo gazed at me in silence for a moment, before letting out a weak huff and shaking his head.

"How are you so much wiser than me when I've been alive for so long?" His lip curled with a hint of self-loathing, and he reached up to scrub at his face. "God, I've fucked up so much in my life. And I never… I never cared until I met you. You make me wish I'd been better."

My chest ached. I slid onto his lap to hug him tight. "Well I know it's messed up, but if you hadn't made those choices, we never would've met."

It was wrong and immoral, but I found it hard to care about what Theo had done and what he still had to do to even be here. He'd made bad decisions in his life, terrible ones. Horrific ones. But they were the reasons I got to have him.

I let out a deep, steadying breath.

"Okay," I said, sitting back on the bed. "How do we do this? I want to talk to Him first. I have… questions."

Theo blinked rapidly, like he was struggling to process everything that was happening. I *was* probably rushing him, but I wanted to get it done. And I wanted to give him his time with the demon.

Lust began to unfurl in my belly at the thought. How would the demon act with him? Would He be as… dominant as He'd been with me?

Would I get to witness it?

The idea of watching the demon overpower Theo, dominate him, use his body—even if it was through me—was so intensely erotic that my cock twitched and rapidly started to fill. Theo had witnessed everything that had happened between me and the demon. He'd been a part of it, sharing it with us. Surely that meant it would be the same for me.

I'd be like… a voyeur in my own body. Experiencing it all, but having no control. The thought made my breath catch with a sharp flare of arousal.

Theo noticed. He was breathing faster as he watched me, like he knew where my thoughts had gone, his face flushed and eyes growing heavy with anticipation.

Visibly trying to calm himself, he cleared his throat and said, “Your pact with Him would be different to mine, so yes, you’d have to speak to Him first. I don’t know how He’d make it with you.”

I smoothed my hand down his back. “How did you do it?”

“I did a ritual to summon and trap Him, so that He had to listen to my offer.”

The offer of his soul in exchange for wealth and immortality. Theo had said he wasn’t religious, and I wasn’t either, but still… What would the demon do with my soul? He’d said before that they were largely useless to Him other than giving Him the ability to inhabit the owner’s body. I assumed they acted more as a seal of contract, locking a person into an unbreakable pact.

“Do you mind?” I asked, leaning in to kiss Theo’s shoulder. “It wouldn’t be for long. And I promise I won’t let Him eat or drink anything,” I added teasingly.

Theo huffed, reaching up to stroke my cheek. “I think you’re the only person in the world who could actually stop Him from doing something.”

Why did that make me want to preen? It shouldn’t have. We were talking about a literal demon. An inhuman creature who was selfish and bloodthirsty and the embodiment of terrible things that people did to each other and to themselves. Putting wealth and power above everything else. Being cruel and callous to others. Killing.

But despite realising all of that—despite knowing all of that—it wasn’t enough to make me change my mind. Maybe deep down, I was as bad as Him. Maybe all humans were, or at least had it in us to be.

Theo let out a shuddering breath, looking like he was trying to prepare himself for what was coming.

“Are you ready?” he asked me quietly.

“Yes.” I clasped his hand and watched him carefully. “Are *you*?”

He flushed, a shudder running down his spine. “I—I think so. It’s been—I’ve wanted for so long to…”

He trailed off, ducking his head shyly before he raised it again to gaze at me with a hint of worry in his eyes.

“You’ll still be there. It’ll be all of us. You’ll just be… sharing a body with Him. But you’ll still be here. You’ll see everything. Feel everything.” His blush deepened, pink against the blue of his beard. “But if you—If you don’t want me to—”

“I want you to have what I had,” I told him calmly, meaning it with every part of me. “You need it. And…” It was my turn to blush as I admitted, “I’m kind of excited to see what He’s like with you.”

Theo rubbed the back of his neck, chuckling sheepishly. “Yeah, well… we’ll see.”

My cock twitched with arousal. “We will.”

“Okay.” Theo took a deep breath, rolling his neck. He looked at me, gaze roaming over my face like he was taking it in once last time while it was still mine. Still me. “I love you, Ari.”

I smiled, leaning in to kiss him. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER

FORTY-NINE

The demon was much quicker to possess Theo's body this time, as if He'd just been waiting for the chance.

It was only seconds after Theo went still and closed his eyes that they flashed open again, irises turning black and bleeding into the sclera, those pinprick white pupils fixing instantly on my face. His mouth stretched into a too-wide grin.

"Hello, my sweet bloom," He crooned, reaching over to stroke my cheek. "I missed you. Are you hungry for me again?"

My gut clenched with lust, remembering that wild, untamed night with Him.

"No," I said steadily, even though I was. "I want to talk to you about our pact."

He went very still, pupils swivelling madly over my frame before fixing on my face again.

"Our pact," He purred, slowly dropping His hand from my cheek. "It is not *our pact* yet, bloom. You haven't agreed to it."

"Well, I want to now," I said with more confidence than I felt, quickly tacking on, "after we agree on some conditions."

I half expected Him to get angry, to fly into a rage over the fact that I was trying to control the offer He'd given me. But He didn't. He chuckled, eyeing me with sly appreciation.

"I see," He rasped with a smirk. "And what are they?"

Straightening my spine, I stared directly at Him. "Firstly, I know you said nothing would change and I wouldn't have to kill anyone—that Theo's sacrifices would be for us both—but that doesn't mean you get to start

demanding that he kills more people. I don't—I don't know how often he does it, but the amount can't change. It can't increase."

Letting out a low huff of amusement, He leaned back on His hands and watched me thoughtfully. "You might be more cunning than he is. It only makes me want you more. A perfect, delicate bloom whose soft petals hide the sharp thorns beneath."

I flushed, refusing to get distracted by His seductive words. "Do you agree?"

He rolled His eyes, an oddly human gesture. "Fine. I agree. I wasn't planning on doing it anyway."

"Okay." I continued quickly. "Second, you can't ever pick anyone we know. Friends or family. Colleagues."

His lips pursed into a sulky little moue. "But those are always the most satisfying to consume."

A shiver ran up my spine, but I frowned at Him sternly. "I won't make a pact with you if you don't agree to it. And it's too dangerous for Theo—he was nearly caught before. He won't be able to honour his pact with you if he's sitting in a prison cell."

"There are ways around everything, bloom," He purred.

"No," I snapped, and He blinked at me in shock. "No friends or family or colleagues. No one we know."

After a long silence, He huffed and muttered, "Fine."

"Okay, this is the last one," I said hurriedly, my stomach jumping when He narrowed His eyes, beginning to look impatient. "Can you—can you extend my pact to Athena? Make it so she never gets old and dies? So she can stay with us?"

He stared at me incredulously. "The dog?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "Theo loves her—we both do. I know it would devastate him when she dies."

He let out a confused, chuffing snort.

"He has had other dogs before. But…" He mused thoughtfully, "he does always fall into a strange depression after their little bodies have weakened and given up. It makes him belligerent for a while. Listless and boring and less willing to obey me."

Except I didn't think that was really the reason He seemed to be considering it. His inhuman eyes had softened just a little, almost like He… cared about Theo, in His own way, and didn't like seeing him in pain.

After loosing a long-suffering sigh, He drawled, “Fine. I will include the dog in your pact.”

A wide, relieved smile stretched my mouth, and before I could stop myself, I was leaning forward to kiss His cheek. “Thank you.”

He chuffed and shifted awkwardly, like He didn’t know how to handle casual affection.

“I accept all your conditions, Ari Sheppard. But”—He shot me a wide, sharp smile—“I have some of my own.”

My stomach twisted with nerves. I sat back and tangled my fingers together, voice uneasy when I said, “What are they?”

“Just two, actually,” He said airily, then smirked at me. “It appears I am not as greedy as my sweet little bloom.”

I raised a brow at Him and stayed silent until He rolled His eyes again and spoke.

“One.” His eyes roamed over me, filling with dark hunger. “I get to have you as often as I want.”

God, that shouldn’t be as erotic as it was. My gut heating with arousal, I licked my lips and said, “I can’t agree to that. That has to be Theo’s decision, because it’s his body you’d have to possess.”

His mouth tipped up into a sly smile. “He will agree to it.”

“And no,” I said hurriedly, making the smirk drop from His mouth as His eyes flashed with a brief flare of anger. “You get me when *I* want it. You don’t get to relentlessly hound Theo until he gives in and lets you possess him. You have to wait until I’ve told him that I… want to be with you again.”

His lip curled into a snarl, but the hunger in His eyes strengthened. “It’s not wise to tease a demon, Ari. If you are going to make me wait, I hope you are prepared for me to fuck you so hard you can barely handle it when I finally get the chance to.”

Fuck. That sounded… incredible.

“Yes,” I said hoarsely, my voice wobbling with lust. “I’ll be prepared.”

“Of course you will,” He crooned, reaching over to thumb my bottom lip. “You crave it as much as I do.”

I let out a shuddering breath, but forced myself to ask, “What—What’s your second condition?”

Any hints of arousal fled His face, and He sat up straight to stare at me with unnerving intensity. “You can never leave us.”

I swallowed nervously. That was a tricky one.

"I… I love Theo so much, and I don't ever want to leave him, but I… can't promise that."

He snarled. "Yes you can. It's easy."

"No. I can't. I'm still human—we both are. Things happen in life. Relationships end even if they feel like they never will, even if you don't want them to. I'm not going to trap either of us that way."

"He doesn't feel trapped," He snapped with a hint of protectiveness in His voice. "He wants to be with you forever."

"I do too," I croaked. "And look at what I'm doing to make that happen. But that doesn't mean I'm going to let you force it. Being together, staying together—it needs to be our choice. Mine and Theo's. You don't get to control it."

His face twisted with anger, but then it smoothed out as He chuckled.

"So fucking insolent. I enjoy it very much." He gave me an appreciate look. "You would make a terrible vessel, but a fine demon."

That made my stomach plummet. I stared at him, my mouth trembling. "I'm—I'm not like you."

"No?" He smirked, leaning in to nuzzle my cheek. "You are so sure of that? What if I was once like you, Ari? And my Théodore? What if I made a pact just like you both, and it twisted me and corrupted me until this was what I became?"

He leaned back and gestured down at Himself. "What if this is what you will both one day turn into?"

My heartrate increased, breaths speeding up. "Is… is that true?"

He shrugged lightly. "Perhaps. Or perhaps I have always been something else. Something older than it all. Something made from different matter. Either way, do you truly care?"

"I—" I stared at the bedspread. "I—"

"Now, our pact," He said briskly, as if He could sense the sudden indecision in me and wanted to put a stop to it. "Our terms have been agreed."

I blinked rapidly, forcing myself to concentrate so He couldn't try and trick me at the last minute.

"No," I said in a hard voice. "*You* agreed to *mine*. I didn't agree to yours. And I explained why."

His lip curled, but after a minute of silence He huffed and muttered, “Fine. I agree to yours, and the rest we leave up to your fickle human ways.”

I knew I shouldn’t be so proud of the fact that I was coming out of this on top, having called all the shots over a *demon*. But I was. I’d got what I wanted. Theo wouldn’t have to make even more sacrifices in His name. The people we knew would all be safe from Him. And Athena could stay with us, and Theo would never have to feel the pain of losing her either.

“I have one more question,” I said tentatively.

His jaw clenched, before He bared His teeth at me in a rabid non-smile. “What is it, bloom? I am getting very impatient.”

“Will you—” I swallowed. “Will you be able to possess me once we do this? Take over my body like… like you can with Theo.”

He went very still, eyes sliding to me. When He answered, His voice was wary, like He was concerned that it was going to make me back out of our deal. “Yes. But only when you allow it.”

“Okay, that’s good.” I nodded, and He blinked in surprise, side-eyeing me cautiously as I shifted onto my knees. “Because I want to give you both… I want you and Theo to have… time together.”

He froze completely, until a shudder ran down His frame and His eyes grew heavy-lidded with lust. “Time with… my vessel.”

I nodded. “I think you both… want that. I know he does. But… you do too, don’t you?”

“Yes,” He hissed immediately, reaching down to palm His hard cock through His clothes. “I have hungered for him as I do you.”

But not just for months, like He had with me since I came into Theo’s life. It had been years. Decades. *Centuries* of them both wanting each other and never being able to have it.

But I could give it to them now. And I desperately wanted to.

“Once we’ve made our pact, I want you to possess me,” I told Him, my cock twitching with anticipation. “Theo’s waiting for you.”

He shuddered again, lips parting with a sharp puff of air. His gaze was greedy when it shifted back to me, roaming over my frame. “I would have you both at once if I could.”

I bit my lip hard, imagining it. Me and Theo… and His big beastly form, His true form, working us both until He was sated.

“This is the best I can offer you,” I croaked, and He grinned with animalistic hunger.

“And it is a generous offer. One I accept.”

I blew out a shaky breath, my body already priming itself, my cock stiffening rapidly and belly dipping with lust. “Okay. How do we do this?”

He hummed, reaching over to slide His hand up my thigh. “You don’t want me to fill you first, bloom? Chase you down and take you again and again until we are both weak from it?”

Oh god. I shuddered, but found the strength to say, “Another time. It’s Theo’s turn. He’s been waiting as long as you have.”

His lids grew heavy again, a hand sliding over His chest before lowering to rub over His straining cock.

“Yes.” He sounded drugged. “We have waited for so long.”

Moving languidly, He leaned over to Theo’s nightstand and tugged open the drawer, pulling out the black-handled flip knife Theo kept in there. I gulped at the sight of it.

“W-will it hurt?” I asked shakily, watching as He flicked the blade free with deft fingers.

“Only for a moment, bloom,” He crooned, shifting on the bed to face me and taking my hand.

I began to tremble as He turned my hand so the palm faced up. This was really happening. I was making a pact with a demon. I was going to let Him possess me.

He leaned down and pressed a tender kiss to my palm. “You will be mine, Ari Sheppard. Ours.” Lifting His head, He gave me a shockingly adoring look. “I will cherish your soul as I do his.”

That made my tense muscles unclench just a little, but they tightened back up when He brought the blade to my hand and sliced deep across my palm in one swift motion.

I flinched from the sharp pain, sucking in a trembling breath. It was *deep*. Blood pumped out of the wound, dripping onto the bed, and my heart began to pound hard and frantically fast.

“Calm, Ari,” He soothed as He sliced open the pad of His thumb.

I was distracted from the pain when His blood welled, thick and viscous and black. It wasn’t human blood. It wasn’t Theo’s blood. It was whatever substance coursed through *Him*, dark and oily and nourished by pain and suffering and death.

Not *just* death, though. He was giving me life. Maybe… maybe it all balanced out in a perverse way. He was giving me and Theo the years He stole from others. Letting us hoard them all selfishly for ourselves, and I guess I *was* selfish, because I wanted them. And I was taking them.

He pressed His bleeding thumb into my wound, pushing it in deep, making me try and yank my arm back instinctively as pain throbbed. But He held my wrist tightly in His other hand, keeping me locked in place to finalise our pact.

His thumb swirled through our mingled blood, black marbling into red, His gaze heavy as He watched.

"Now for my mark," He rasped, lifting His ravenous eyes to mine. "You know where I want it, bloom."

I swallowed, trembling wildly as I reached down tug my pyjama bottoms lower on my hips and fumble with the buttons on my shirt. Once my pale stomach was bared, He groaned and leaned down to nuzzle my skin, still holding our bleeding hands steady.

When He released my hand to press His thumb to my hipbone, just above the crease of my groin, I had to grit my teeth to stop from crying out. It *burned*, hotter than anything I'd ever felt, unbearable and searing like it was cooking my insides, turning me to ash.

I sagged when He lifted His thumb and the pain faded into numbness. He leaned down and licked away the blood, but the mark remained. A dark, brownish-black thumb print, stark against my pale skin.

He rumbled with pleasure and licked it again, just the tip of His tongue circling His mark. But I couldn't feel it—it was completely numb there now, like He'd burned away all my nerve endings in that one tiny spot.

My bleeding hand was quaking wildly, still dripping crimson onto the bed. After sucking the blood from His thumb, He ducked His head and swept His tongue over the cut in a long, savouring lick, His back shuddering as He groaned.

The throbbing pain slowly faded, but I had only a second to realise that the wound had closed, only a faint pink scar there that matched the one on my other hand, before He was crushing His lips to mine and thrusting His blood-coated tongue into my mouth.

I let out a muffled sound of shock. The taste of blood filled my mouth, metallic and rich and savoury. It should have sickened me, but all I felt was lust as I moaned, melting into the kiss. Our tongues glided together

hungrily, and I found the taste of blood sliding down the back of my throat as I swallowed.

"Yes," He rasped unsteadily against my mouth. "Let me in."

My limbs tingled before going numb. My head suddenly felt cloudy, like I was drunk, and when my eyes flashed open, my vision was murky and dark. Like a film was beginning to coat my eyes.

His were already open, staring unwaveringly at me from up close. But His glowing pupils were slowly turning grey, and white was bleeding back into His sclera at the very edges. Deep brown began to fan out from His darkening pupils, Theo's familiar irises returning.

My eyelids fluttered, body growing heavy and lax. My brain tried to fight it for one last moment as I felt Him infecting me, taking over, but I forced myself to let it happen. I'd wanted this. I'd allowed it.

"Let me in," He snarled again, gripping my head in clawing hands before giving me another brutal kiss.

So I did. I let Him in.

CHAPTER

FIFTY

My body felt disjointed when I opened my eyes, everything dark but too bright at the same time. My pupils swivelled wildly, trying to roll back as I desperately fought to acclimate myself to the sense of… someone else. Another.

He was here.

Lurking at the back of my mind, something thick and dark rushing through my limbs, infecting my whole body. I blinked rapidly, wondering why I still felt largely like myself. But as I thought it, I felt His presence swell, growing and growing, taking control.

Theo was panting weakly in front of me, hands trembling as he scrubbed them over his face. Then he went very still. Slowly, his eyes lifted to meet mine, fearful and adoring at the same time.

His breath caught as he stared at me. Us.

"Is it… really you?" he whispered.

His voice echoed in my head. I saw my hand lift, cup his cheek, thumb his lower lip. Theo's eyes slid shut, expression flooding with pure bliss.

"It's me," I heard myself say, but it wasn't me saying it. My voice was… wrong.

It wasn't mine. It was His.

Ours, He whispered lovingly.

"My sweet Théodore," We murmured, voice low and throaty like molten lava rushing through the earth. "You have waited so long for me. For him. Now you have us both."

My sense of self was slowly melting, intertwining with His, becoming dual, no longer just one. I had a last moment of shock when Theo let out a

low sob of relief before I gave over to it completely, no longer me. Now Us.

"Yes," Theo whispered, opening his eyes to gaze at Us adoringly. "Both. I was good. I was good for you, and he's my reward. Both of you. Please."

We huffed out a low, beastly snort of amusement, caressing Theo's bottom lip again before pulling back. Our eyes dipped, tracking over his body, lip curling into a sneer.

"You know that I prefer you bared in my presence."

His breath caught, cheeks going pink before he scrambled up and hurriedly stripped off his clothes. Kneeling back on the bed naked, he took Our hands and lowered his forehead to Our knuckles with reverent desperation.

"*Mon dieu,*" he whispered. *My god.* "*Je vous vénère. J'ai attendu si longtemps.*"

I worship you. I have waited so long.

"*Notre chéri*," We murmured, cupping his chin and tilting his head. Theo's eyes were wet as he gazed at Us. "*Tu as souffert trop longtemps. Tu as besoin de Nous, n'est-ce pas? Ton corps Nous réclame."*

You have suffered for too long. You need Us, don't you? Your body is calling for Us.

"*Oui*," Theo whispered pleadingly. He dipped his head to kiss Our palm. "*S'il vous plaît."*

"We can see it," We noted, voice raspy with dry amusement as We tugged Our hand free to lower it between our bodies.

Theo jolted with a clipped moan when We curled Our fingers around his stiff cock, squeezing only briefly before dipping Our hand to palm his heavy sac. He let out a shaky breath, hips twitching, but stayed obediently still.

"Do you give yourself to Us, sweet Théodore? Just as your Ari has given himself to me?"

"Yes," Theo whispered immediately. His cock brushed Our sensitive inner wrist as it lurched with arousal.

"You give your body to Us?" We raised Our other hand and placed it flat over Theo's sternum, feeling the frantic pounding of his heart.

Suddenly, an overwhelming sense of displacement overcame Us—me. I was me again as I felt Him rise up in a rush and push me back, taking over our shared body to say, "I have waited so long to slake my lust on you, my loyal servant."

Our voice was no longer Ours—my softer layer was gone, and it was just Him, harsh and grating and hot. I fought viciously, trapped in an elusive void that wasn't my own mind, nor my own body, watching detachedly as He took over.

No, I shouted. *He's ours, not yours. This body is mine, not yours. You don't get it completely. We share it because I've let you in. You don't get to push me out.*

I felt Him fighting me, even as alien feelings of obsessive devotion washed over me—from Him. Like His nature was forcing him to try and take over, to possess me completely, but He was trying to tell me that He didn't truly want to at the same time.

He receded enough for us to meld again, and I felt Our body shudder as everything melted back into One. We let out a sigh of relief.

We were still palming Theo's tender sac, keeping him trapped in Our grip. His dark eyes searched Ours, and what he saw there filled his own gaze with fearful, adoring worship.

"Ari—you're still here?" he whispered, voice uncharacteristically vulnerable.

"Yes," We said, leaning in to kiss his forehead.

Theo shuddered out a relieved breath. He was trembling lightly, and it got stronger when We rasped, "Kneel."

He already was, but he knew what We meant. He scrambled to the floor, knees cracking as they thudded onto the floorboards between Our legs.

His cock was already dripping, flushed deep. Our mouth watered at the sight of it, hunger surging up so intensely it was almost painful. But We forced Ourself to draw the exquisite torture out, leaning down to slide Our fingers through his hair.

His face tilted up, eyes fluttering as he panted shallowly. Our gaze roamed over his handsome features. His dark eyes and arched brows. Strong nose and jaw. Firm lips within his indigo beard.

Thumbing the ring through the centre of his lower lip, We murmured, "I like this version of you the most, Théodore. Adorned. Painted," We added, tangling Our fingers through his and stroking over faded tattoos. "Ari is a sweet bloom, a testament to the wonder of nature, but you… you are a forged masterpiece."

Not giving him a chance to answer, We bumped Our nose against his and murmured, "Kiss your god, Théodore. Kiss the one who made you what

you are.”

Letting out a hoarse sound of submission, Theo tilted his chin and pressed his trembling mouth to Ours. We snarled, clawing his hair and tipping his head back further, stretching his throat. He moaned as We forced Our tongue in deep, invading, bending him to Our will.

But he acquiesced so readily, shuddering with pleasure as We conquered his mouth. Hunger for him surged, filling Us completely, years and years and years of it pouring into the vicious kiss. We shoved him back in a rush, clambering over his body to straddle his hips, pushing his head hard into the floor as We devoured him.

“You are mine,” We snarled against his panting mouth. “I hated you at first for making me feel this way. For making me want you so much when I should be above it. But now… now I need you, my vessel.” We lifted Our head to stare down at him, chest heaving with snarling breaths. “I need to fill you.”

“Yes,” Theo pleaded, hands trembling as they slid over Our hips, Our stomach. His cock surged against Our backside, leaking fluid through the stifling fabric still covering Our body. “Please. Let me worship you. I—I need to worship you.”

We smiled, sharp and wide, leaning down to give him a jarringly soft kiss before looking back at the bed. Up at the canopy, at the chains and straps.

We looked back down at him, sitting up to rest Our hands over his wildly beating heart.

“We will worship each other.”

CHAPTER

FIFTY-ONE

Theo's nude body quaked as he balanced precariously on his knees on the bed. His arms were raised above his head, wrists chained together and suspended from the canopy.

We had already stripped down to nothing, and We stroked Our hard cock as We stepped back up onto the mattress to check that the restraints were secure. When We looked down, satisfied, Theo was staring with desperation at Our straining length, just inches from his face.

We huffed in amusement, moving back to perch on the top of the headboard, the wall cold against Our lower spine, legs spread wide for balance.

"You want it, don't you?" We asked slyly as We fisted Our length and gave it a slow stroke. "So hungry for Us. For this beautiful body."

"Please," he whispered.

Smirking, We stood up and stepped forward on the mattress, stopping just out of reach as We lifted a hand and curled it around a strap on the canopy. Gripping Our cock with the other, We arched Our hips to rub the tip against his mouth, painting his lips with clear fluid.

He moaned shakily, kissing the very tip of Our cock with reverence before laving his pierced tongue over it. We hissed, and when he tried to suck it into his mouth, We pulled back so it was out of reach.

Groaning with desperation, Theo tried to follow. The chains rattled as they jerked him to a halt, and he whined as his cock bucked, drooling pre-cum onto the bed.

"Please," he panted again, gazing up at Us with adoring eyes clouded by overwhelming arousal. "*Laissez-moi vous vénérer. S'il vous plaît. J'en ai*

besoin."

Let me worship you. Please. I need it.

We smirked, stroking his cheek as he devolved into rapid French, begging mindlessly, pleading with Us. We cut him off by fisting his hair and shoving Our cock into his mouth, making him choke before he moaned gutturally and began to suck.

"Yes," We hissed, baring Our teeth in a rabid snarl before Our head tipped back.

Theo moaned with every ardent bob of his head, pulling back briefly to gasp for air before plunging his mouth back down. The orgasm rose up quickly, his mouth so hot, the suction mind-numbing. Our hips started rutting against his face, plunging Our cock as deep as possible, until We pulled back and pumped it in Our fist with growing speed.

Our fingers bit into the strap on the canopy as We started to come, shouting in brutal pleasure, Our cock pumping ribbons of white onto his blue beard, over his cheeks, his forehead. It dripped onto the bridge of his nose as he panted, our eyes locked until We knelt in front of him on legs that threatened to buckle.

"We are just beginning, vessel," We murmured, before licking up everything We had given him to shove Our coated tongue into his mouth.

He groaned in appreciation, hungrily lapping up Our release and swallowing, his restrained body shuddering with pleasure from the taste.

"You have some for me too, don't you?" We purred, skimming a hand down his trembling front, through soft hair and over his stomach, to dance Our fingertips over the leaking head of his cock.

He arched with a cry, fluid pulsing from the angrily flushed tip. Bringing Our fingers to Our lips, We licked it up and moaned, eyes growing heavy as We stared at him.

"You were worth the wait, my Théodore."

He sobbed in pleasure, both from the words and the light fingertips skimming once again up and down his straining length. With a smirk, We dipped down to suck the tip into Our mouth, moaning at the heat and salty taste of his pre-cum.

"*Ah!*" Theo's hips bucked madly, forcing more into Our mouth. We huffed in amusement around his length and took a deep draw, Our lips stretched wide. The pierced head popped from Our mouth as We pulled back, breathing hard as We sat up.

“You are much thicker than he is.” We smirked at him, squeezing his tight sac. “But I enjoy both very much. The weight of either of you on my tongue is…” We shuddered. “Perfection.”

Theo’s breaths were shuddering out of him. His hips twitched, arms trying to twist in the restraints, making the chains clink softly. We lifted a hand and pushed Our middle finger into his mouth, grunting when he sucked feverishly.

He jerked when We gave his sensitive inner thigh a sharp smack with our other hand. “Wider.”

Trembling, he let his knees slide out, sinking him lower to the bed. He winced, arms stretching tight above his head, his backside just able to hover over his heels. His thick thighs shook from the strain, but he went obediently still, waiting.

Pulling Our finger free, We lowered it between his legs, sliding it back until the tip circled his hole. It twitched as Theo’s hips jerked and he let out a shuddering moan.

“You know what I want, my loyal vessel,” We crooned against his mouth, sinking the tip of Our finger into tight heat. “To rut into this handsome body, to feel you clench around me again and again, just as our sweet Ari did. You want it too, don’t you? You ache to feel me inside you. You ache for me to fill you.”

“Pl-pl-please,” Theo whimpered, panting too hard to kiss Us back, his mouth trembling.

“Mmm.” We pressed a final kiss to his lips before leaning over to grab the tube of lubricant. After coating Our fingers, We reached back to his hole and plunged two inside without warning.

“Sh-shit.” Theo winced, but his cock bucked as his hips strained forward, instinctively trying to escape the sudden intrusion.

We didn’t let him, grabbing his sac and squeezing tight enough to hurt as We twisted Our fingers inside him, grinning with rabid hunger at the sight of his pain-pleasure. His body fought for another brief moment before he melted into it, his rim spasming around Our fingers.

But We were growing impatient. Too hungry to fill him. We had waited long enough. This *need* coursing through Us was alien and familiar at the same time, making Us snarl as We pulled Our fingers free and sat back against the headboard, thighs splayed invitingly.

“I will mount you later,” We told him in a gravelly voice, then smirked as We slicked Our cock and held it upright, ready for him. “But first you want to worship me, don’t you? So do it.” We gestured at Our cock. “Worship me.”

Theo’s throat bobbed as he shuffled forward on trembling legs, clumsily straddling Our hips. His arms stretched back, and it couldn’t have been comfortable, but he didn’t complain. He didn’t care. We could see the desperation in his eyes, We could feel it as he lowered his hips until Our cockhead notched against his hole.

We held it steady but didn’t move. Theo swallowed again, eyes closing as he let out a shuddering breath and bore down. He jerked with a gasp when the head popped inside, his neck arching.

Releasing Our cock, We palmed his trembling thighs and slid Our hands up. His cock was still hard and jutting, throbbing in Our fist when We squeezed the slick head.

“W-w-wait,” he blurted desperately. “I’ll c-come.”

“You’ll wait ‘til you’ve sated me,” We purred, running Our hands back to grip his backside and spread him wide. He winced, rocking his hips to slide further and further down Our aching cock.

“I—I th-think—” He cried out when We thrust up and plunged fully inside him. “I c-c-can’t—”

He cut himself off with a raw shout as his hips stuttered, cock jerking in the air before a single spurt of cum shot out of him. We clamped Our hand around his cockhead, squeezing his slit shut. He shouted gutturally again, hips bucking frantically to try and shake Our hand off, sweat-damp hair hanging in his face as it tipped forward.

“I said not yet,” We snarled, closing Our other hand around his sac and tugging.

Theo turned his head and buried his face in his straining bicep, heaving out sobbing breaths from his ruined orgasm.

We sneered, slowly releasing Our hands once the danger had passed to palm his thighs again. “We have barely begun, Théodore. Sweet Ari could last longer than that.”

“Pl-please,” he panted weakly, resting his temple on his straining arm. His forehead was dotted with sweat, chest heaving. “I’ve w-waited so long. Please don’t make me wait anymore. I’ll be g-good for you after this, I promise. I just n-need you to—I need—”

“No,” We rasped firmly. “You will ride my cock first. Use this handsome body to bring me release.”

Sitting up, We nuzzled his heaving chest, tugging at a pierced nipple with Our teeth and rubbing Our nose through sweat-damp hair.

“And then I will untie you and worship every inch of you,” We murmured, making Theo loose a shuddering breath.

Sitting back, We smirked at him and gave his straining cock a sharp tap, making him flinch with a gasp.

“But this first,” We drawled. “Ride me until you no longer can. Until you are limp and weak but wish you didn’t have to stop.”

Swallowing thickly, he obeyed. His thighs trembled madly as he raised and lowered his hips, sliding Our cock in and out of his hot body. His hands twisted in their restraints, fingers curling around the chains to give him leverage as he rode Us faster and faster, no longer able to stop even though his body had to be hurting, stretched so tightly.

A slew of breathless moans and pleas poured from him in an unbroken stream. Our lips peeled back from Our teeth in a pleasured snarl, eyes locked on the sight of Our cock plunging inside him again and again. We kept Our hips still, even though they twitched with the urge to rut up into him.

He still didn’t stop even when the strength started to leave him, thighs quaking and body going limp until his bound wrists were the only thing holding him up. His tanned, tattooed skin glistened with sweat, tempting Us to lean forward and lick it off his neck.

“I can’t—I can’t—” He sobbed helplessly into Our hair. “I need to come—I—”

“Not yet,” We bit out unsteadily, but Our orgasm was already barrelling down on Us, Our cock swelling in his tight heat.

Our hips started to jerk up into him, smacking against his backside as We panted heavily and clutched his straining thighs.

“Not—not yet,” We panted again, hips stuttering, before Our head tipped back against the headboard and We let out a strained shout.

We felt lines of heat hit Our throat and chest as We pumped Our release inside him. Theo was crying out, his hole clenching repeatedly around the base of Our cock as he came so hard he almost pushed Us out, channel squeezing impossibly tight.

He went completely limp when it ended. Wood cracked in the canopy as it took his full weight, and he was shaking so hard his teeth chattered. Sliding free of his body, We manoeuvred out from under him and stood on shaking legs to release him from the chains.

He collapsed onto the bed the moment his wrists were free, face buried in the pillow. We climbed over him to nuzzle his sweat-damp nape and shoulders, pressing kisses down his spine.

“You did so well, my Théodore,” We cooed as We kissed the swell of his backside.

Theo whimpered weakly and shook harder when We spread his cheeks and licked his leaking hole. But soon his hips were moving, rocking into Our mouth and sliding his softened, sensitive cock against the bed.

Grinning wide, We slunk back up his body and slid Our still-hard cock between his cheeks, catching the head on his relaxed rim.

“Again, my vessel?” We purred, spreading him wide to watch as We teased his hole with the tip of Our cock.

Theo let out a shuddering breath, but he was already raising his hips higher, knees sliding out to spread his thighs.

“Again,” he whispered. “As many times as we can.”

CHAPTER

FIFTY-TWO

That turned out to be many, many times.

After mounting him and rutting until we both came again, We rubbed his sore muscles to soothe them before going downstairs to get him some water.

He was still trembling lightly as he drank it, sitting up in bed, but his eyes stayed locked on Us, filled with adoring worship.

Once his thirst was sated, We urged him to lie back down with deep kisses and gentle hands, before sliding down his body to suck him languidly. It took him a short while to get hard again, his body drained, but soon he was straining in Our mouth, his hips writhing against the bed as he clenched fistfuls of Our hair.

We let him sleep for a while after that, wandering out of the bedroom to cleanse Our body in the bathroom before padding downstairs and into the kitchen. We reluctantly picked at the food this time and drank only a little wine, knowing this dainty body couldn't take as much as Our vessel's.

Seeing his cigarettes on the counter, We picked them up with the lighter and walked back into the hall. But before going upstairs, We found Ourself staring at the library door. Walking slowly, We opened it and stepped inside. The books didn't interest Us. We crossed the room to the open door that led into the winter garden, staring inside.

The one place We couldn't go. The one place We couldn't reach him. Absently, We reached up and rubbed Our chest as we stared into the dark room, the cloying scent of damp earth filling Our nose.

We missed him when he was in there, though We were loath to admit it, and would never say it out loud. Sometimes, unimaginable rage rose inside

Us when We thought about what he had done to Us. Made Us *want*. We shouldn't lust for anything but blood and death and flesh to consume. Pain and suffering.

But he had made Us want him.

We couldn't love, though it was getting harder to pick out and cast aside that overwhelming emotion when We inhabited these two human bodies. To keep it separate. We wondered briefly if letting Ourself feel it, embrace it, would allow Us to harness it. To control it. To use it for Our own gain.

But even as We thought it, We realised that We… didn't want to.

Turning from the threshold We couldn't cross, We left the library and went back upstairs. Theo was still sleeping, his drained body flopped carelessly on the bed. Unnatural affection seeped in as We sat beside him and smoothed his hair back from his face.

Our Théodore. Our vessel, so loyal and adoring for all these years. And so alone, his pact with Us keeping him isolated. Weak human jealousy had made Us choose any lovers he'd had in the past as sacrifices. He was *Ours*.

Shifting on the bed to lean back against the headboard, We lit a cigarette and savoured the poison seeping into Our lungs as We absently ran Our fingers through Theo's hair. The sharp scent of smoke made him stir, eyes blinking open blearily as he raised his head.

He swallowed when he gazed up at Us. Staring back in silence, We held out the cigarette packet until he slowly sat up and plucked one out.

"I'm not done with you yet, my vessel," We rasped as he lit it. His eyes darted over to Us, wary and aroused all at once. We smirked. "But we will rest first."

He nodded, body relaxing as he inhaled smoke deeply. We reached over for the ashtray, placing it on Our lap. Theo's eyes followed the cigarette as We brought it back to Our mouth.

"Ari…" he began cautiously. "Ari can't get sick now, right? Like me?"

"That's right," We drawled, smirking at him. "And neither can your little dog. You get to keep that one too."

His mouth slowly tipped up into a smile, and Our chest got strangely tight. We rubbed it irritably, sucking in toxic smoke before tapping the ash off into the tray.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for showing mercy."

We snorted, rolling Our head back against the headboard. "Perhaps you are both making me soft."

He chuckled, shaking his head as he took a drag of his cigarette. “Is that possible?”

“No.” We smirked, which made him laugh again.

This was… strange. We had never been like this together—this relaxed and… easy. It had always been Master and servant. God and fervent worshipper. Demon and man.

But things had changed now. We had *shared*. Shared our bodies in a mutual dance, not our contractual give-and-take where we were both only giving to the other for the benefit of our own selves.

Need for him was rising up again, making Our gaze grow heavy as We watched him. He noticed after a few moments, cheeks getting flushed as he licked his lips and stubbed out his cigarette, watching Us back.

We did the same, then slowly shifted the ashtray off the bed. In the next instant, we were lunging for each other, mouths crashing together messily as We pushed him onto his back. It took Us long moments to tear Our lips from his, but when We managed, We spun around and straddled his face as We sucked him into Our mouth.

Snarling breaths shuddered out of Us as his mouth and tongue moved against such a vulnerable place, making Us hungry to feel him plunging inside. Filling *Us*.

Before either of us could come, We rose off him to turn and straddle his waist. When he realised what We were about to do, he quickly fumbled for the lube, protective of this delicate body. The stretch of his fingers burned in the best way, making Us bare Our teeth down at him. And then We were sliding down onto his straining cock, hissing from the exquisite sharp ache that flared.

We rode him frantically, viciously, slamming down again and again as his warm hands slid all over Us, making Us shudder from the intensity. We bent down and crushed Our mouth to his, groaning shakily into it when his heat flooded Us and painful, brutal pleasure made Our limbs tremble, Our body overworked but still so hungry for him.

Always so hungry for him.

CHAPTER

FIFTY-THREE

I felt like death warmed over when I woke, but a smile was already stretching my mouth.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Theo passed out beside me, his face lax in sleep. His hair was a wild mess, and bite marks littered his neck and shoulders.

My belly clenched as I remembered the demon's last time with him, just a couple of hours ago as dawn had approached. He had clambered between Theo's legs, pushing through his swollen hole to rut into him like a mindless animal. Our shared body had been sore, growing weak, and surely Theo had been too. But the need had still been there. All-consuming, hot and fiery, but desperate. Adoring.

The demon worshipped Theo in His own way, just as Theo worshipped Him.

Carefully rolling onto my back so I didn't disturb him, I winced as every muscle in my body screamed in protest. Hesitantly lifting the covers, I stared down at His mark on my hip. Trailing my fingers down my front, I pressed the tips to the dark thumbprint and realised it was completely numb. I couldn't feel the touch at all.

I wondered absently why I felt largely fine. The demon hadn't eaten or drunk much in my body, so maybe that was it. But as I sat up, my head swam. My limbs felt oddly light and floaty, like my body wasn't yet used to having the weight of only a single being inside it once again.

My stomach was shaky as I slipped out of bed and hobbled to the bathroom on weak legs. I had to sit down on the edge of the bath when I got there, my head spinning and vision going wobbly like I was drunk. Heaving

myself back up, I drank deeply from the tap before splashing my face and brushing my teeth.

I wanted to have a shower—I desperately *needed* one after last night—but I didn't think it was safe to stand on slippery tiles alone when I was this woozy. After using the toilet, I ran a very shallow bath so that I wouldn't drown even if I did pass out in it. Lowering myself into the water, I washed slowly, wincing when I cleaned my cock. It was sore, practically chafed, and my nuts were tender with a sharp ache. The demon had drained my body, greedily consuming my energy and essence to fuel His endless hunger for Theo.

I shivered at the memory of it. It had been just like Theo had said—I'd experienced all of it. All the mindless, desperate fucking, all the murmured conversations they had shared. I remembered lying beside Theo once He had finally let him drop into deep sleep at dawn, just staring at him with unblinking eyes. Tracing the edges of his beard, running our shared fingertips over his eyelids and down the slope of his nose. Caressing his wide shoulders, trailing a hand down his spine to stroke the mark on his lower back.

I remembered all the thoughts the demon had had while infecting my mind. The ravenous, undying hunger for Theo. And for actual food. For all of it—everything He couldn't experience in His true form, longing tinged with bitterness colouring His actions as He devoured all the tastes and scents and textures and sharp, overwhelming sensations in the body He had taken over to gorge Himself on them all.

The resentment towards us both for making Him want us, even as it tangled with ferocious devotion that felt unnatural to Him.

It seemed like the demon wanting us was as fucked up for Him as our own desire for Him was. Like we had all… turned our backs on our instincts to make it happen.

I exhaled shakily in the bath, scrubbing at my face. The night had been so intense, but muted at the same time. Like I had been watching it all, feeling everything in the background. Almost like *I* had been the intruder in my own body.

It had been unsettling, but… addictive. Giving up complete control—all of it. The ultimate act of submission. Not just allowing someone else to handle me and play with me however they wanted, but letting Him take

over me from the inside, take total possession. Use me as a tool for His own pleasure and greed.

I pulled out the plug and stood, climbing out of the bath on weak legs. As I dried off with a towel, I dragged my feet to the bedroom and clambered back into bed beside Theo, waking him up as I flopped down tiredly.

"Dimples," he croaked, blinking hard to wake himself up fully. Shuffling closer, he buried his face in my throat and let out a relieved sigh. "I missed you."

Chuckling, I rested my hand on his hip and stroked my fingers over warm skin. "You were too preoccupied to miss me."

He cleared his throat, and when he moved his head back his cheeks were pink. I raised my hand to stroke one, shooting him a tiny smirk.

"Did you enjoy it?" My voice got low and throaty at the memories that made my shaky stomach tighten.

Theo's eyelids fluttered, lips parting with a tiny puff of air as he remembered it all too.

"Yes," he whispered, then leaned in to kiss me hard. I could still taste the demon on his lips—hot and fiery.

"Thank you," he murmured hoarsely when we broke apart. "Thank you for doing that for me."

"Just returning the favour." I smiled slyly at him before closing my eyes and burying my cheek in the pillow, yawning as I was hit by a wave of exhaustion.

"You need a lot of rest." Theo gently pushed my hair back from my cheek and kissed my forehead. "I'll make you chicken noodle soup for when you wake up."

I smiled tiredly without opening my eyes and slid my hand down his side to cup a firm ass cheek. "You need to rest too. Are you hurting?"

He chuckled sheepishly, tangling his legs with mine under the covers. "I'm fine, dimples. Luckily your cock's not as big as mine," he added teasingly.

My eyes flashed open to shoot him a mock glare.

"My dick is perfectly proportioned to the rest of me," I told him sternly, then smirked as I rolled onto my back and stretched. "It's flawless."

"It is," he agreed in a throaty voice. "All of you is."

I peeked an eye open to grin at him. “And now I’ll stay this way forever.”

His throat bobbed as all hints of teasing fled from his face, replaced by soul-deep relief and yearning as he gazed at me.

“You will,” he whispered, cupping my face to stroke his thumb over my cheek. “With me. For as long as you want me.”

“Well then, prepare yourself to be stuck with me for a very, very long time.” I rolled back onto my side, tucking my hands under my cheek as I gazed at him. “What will we do?”

He smiled, tracing the corner of my eye. “Whatever we want.”

I grinned, excitement temporarily chasing out the bone-deep exhaustion in my body. “Can we travel?”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart.” He leaned in to kiss my cheek. “But we can make plans later. We have all the time. Right now, you need to sleep. And I should get up.”

I grunted sleepily, shuffling closer and trying to wrap myself around him so he couldn’t move. “Stay in bed with me. I’ll sleep better if you’re here.”

He chuckled, gently extracting himself from my grasping limbs. “Trust me, you’d sleep through an earthquake right now. And I at least need to get up to look after Athena. She needs a walk and her breakfast.”

That was true. I grunted again and settled down, but when Theo didn’t move for long moments, I peeked open one eye to frown at him. He was staring at me with an anguished expression, eyes glassy.

“Thank you for what you did—what you got Him to give us,” he whispered. “For Athena.”

Opening both eyes, I rested my palm on the centre of his chest. “I don’t ever want you to feel any pain again.”

He swallowed, dropping his gaze. “I deserve to. I don’t deserve to have either of you—any of it. I’ve always—I’ve always felt like I deserved everything I wanted, whatever the cost. However much it hurt other people. I’ve never”—he shrugged stiltedly—“I’ve never cared about what I’ve had to do to get what I want.”

I pursed my lips, trying to navigate my question for him carefully. “And do you… do you now? Do you ever… regret tying yourself to Him?”

Theo’s face was calm. “No,” he said simply.

I stared at him, my vision hazy with exhaustion. “Doesn’t it… affect you mentally to have to kill people?”

Surely it did. The action of taking a life, watching it drain out of another human being. The gore. The blood. The knowledge that he was taking someone away from the people who loved them.

He stared at me in silence for a moment.

“No,” he eventually admitted, lips thinning into a grim line. “I know it’s sick, but it doesn’t. It’s just what I have to do. Especially now,” he added, clasping my face as he gazed at me with solemn eyes. “Now that it will keep you and Athena safe and healthy and alive.”

I nodded, swallowing thickly. I knew it was fucked up, but I felt more guilt over my own complicity in the murder of people than I did for Theo’s actions. But Theo still had to do it anyway, even if I didn’t benefit from it.

He had made some of the worst decisions a person could make—done some of the worst things a person could do—but did that mean he deserved to be alone for the rest of his life? Maybe I was as sick as he was, because I didn’t think so. I loved him, and I *wanted* to love him. I didn’t wish it would go away so that I could hate him for what he did, and not because of what he and his demon had given me.

He was deeply flawed—a terrible person to the rest of the world—but I was flawed too. Weren’t we all? Weren’t all humans capable of doing grotesque and vile things and making heinous decisions that changed everything irrevocably in an instant?

Didn’t we all have it in us to be selfish and greedy and treat others despicably? I knew I *was* selfish, because I didn’t care about how Theo treated others. I cared about how he treated me, which was better than anyone else ever had.

Anyway, it was done now. I had made my deal with a demon, and there was no going back.

And I was sick too, because I didn’t regret it. Not even for a second.

CHAPTER

FIFTY-FOUR

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

I had still never asked how often Theo had to kill people, but I knew it was… fairly often.

I tried not to think about it when the wisteria on the front of the house would start to droop—growing limp and lifeless, lilac flowers dropping to the ground and littering the drive—because I was beginning to suspect what it meant.

And I started to notice Theo's little rituals before and after a sacrifice. It had only happened twice in the months since his feverish night with the demon, but I was keenly aware of it now.

He always cooked a huge vat of cassoulet, which he'd told me was the last meal he ate before he summoned the demon. He would quietly ask me if I wanted to go to bed early, and would give me a long kiss before closing the door behind him as he left.

The first time that I'd lain there in bed, horribly aware of what he was doing, I hadn't slept. I'd heard the crunch of tyres as his car left the driveway, and the same noise again when he returned hours later.

I'd listened to the slow, heavy drag of fabric across the tiles in the front hall, which made me realise what I'd been hearing all those months ago, when I'd woken up in the night and thought the "ghost" had hurt Theo.

He'd gotten into bed that night just before dawn, his skin warmed from a shower but still smelling faintly of Him. And in the morning when we'd left for work, the wisteria had been bursting with new blooms, their scent druggingly heavy in the air.

In the days that followed, I noticed the other little things that signalled a fresh sacrifice. He'd go into town to get his hair cut and beard redyed. He looked younger and rejuvenated, his eyes bright and skin flushed with good health. I felt it too. I felt youthful, full of energy, waking up in a fantastic mood despite knowing what he'd done.

And we became unimaginably hungry for each other, able to fuck again and again in quick succession, more times in a single stretch than should have been physically possible. We spent whole days having endless sex, getting up only to eat and shower and tend to Athena before falling back

into bed, attacking each other in the front hall or the sitting room or out in the garden.

I rode him frantically on a sun lounger on the patio. He bent me over the kitchen island and fucked me senseless. I went to him one evening while he was doing work in his office and knelt at his feet, silently undoing his fly to tug his jeans down just enough and urge his feet up onto the desk, forcing his knees towards his chest. Then I'd rimmed him feverishly while he panted out heaving breaths from above, clutching the armrests of his chair in a white-knuckled grip.

The next morning as we'd been getting ready to leave for work, he'd coaxed me down onto the cold tiles in the front hall and straddled my face, staring down at me silently as he undid his fly. Then he'd fucked my throat raw, fisting my hair so hard it stung and calling me a good boy between clenched teeth as I gazed up at him with streaming, lust-heavy eyes. My voice had been hoarse for the rest of the day, and I obviously hadn't told Inaya why, but I smiled every time I remembered it.

After the frenzy had faded, we would return to the simple bliss of just living. Lazy, quiet dinners side by side at the kitchen island. Long walks with Athena. Cleaning the house together and going food shopping. They were trivial things, but I loved the boring stuff with him as much as I loved the passion and heat. I hadn't ever realised how much I craved it—just living peacefully with someone who loved me so intensely that I could feel it even when he wasn't saying anything. Even when he was just sitting beside me, holding my hand or absently stroking the back of my neck while he was pre-occupied by work or a book or the TV.

I wasn't interested in using our endless time to go on wild adventures or become insanely rich and powerful. I just wanted this. To just be with him. To just be.

As autumn passed us, the house remained as beautiful and idyllic as it had always been, leaves turning gold and red and brown on the trees outside, frost glittering on the grass early in the mornings. Lisa brought in crates of plums, apples and pears from the garden for us, and Theo used them to make tarte tatin, chocolate and pear pudding, plum crumble. I went blackberry picking with her one day along the hedgerows behind the house, returning home with cheeks flushed from the cold and fingers scratched from thorns, proudly brandishing a full basket at Theo. He'd smiled,

cupping my face and giving me a warm kiss, then dutifully carried them into the kitchen to make jam.

At the end of November, we went out and selected two big trees to put in the front hall and sitting room, spending a lazy evening decorating them and stringing up fairy lights while we drank mulled wine and played with Athena.

The tree in the hall glimmered invitingly as I made my way downstairs one Saturday evening, having showered and changed into fresh clothes after work. We were having Edel and Amir over for dinner, so I found Theo in the kitchen preparing the ingredients for our starter. He had decided on *Coquilles Saint-Jacques en gratin*—scallop gratin—which he would make once they'd arrived.

He never listened to music or watched videos on his phone while he cooked. He enjoyed the quiet calm of it, his movements languid but confident. I watched him for a few seconds until he noticed me as he turned from the fridge cradling crème fraiche, cheese and butter in his arms.

"Hi, dimples." His gaze tracked over my frame as he put the items down, taking in my tight black dress that reached mid-thigh. It was cold outside, but the house was warm, and we were eating in the little-used dining room which had a fireplace that Theo had already lit.

I grinned and walked around the island, wrapping my arms around his neck once I reached him. His hands settled on my waist and immediately slid down, palming my backside through the dress.

As he dipped his head to kiss me, I felt his long fingers rucking up the material until my ass was exposed. My ass and the lacy burgundy panties I was wearing. Theo grunted into my mouth as he traced the edge of the fabric, squeezing my cheeks hard.

I chuckled as I pulled back to raise a brow at him. "They'll be here in a minute."

"I know," he rasped, gaze wandering down my front, but he carefully smoothed the material back down and patted my ass as he kissed my temple.

While he headed over to the sink, I rested my elbows on the island and snagged his glass of water. After taking a sip, I slyly said, "Don't worry, I'll show you later."

Theo glanced over at me, his eyes darkening with lust as he washed his hands. "I know you will, sweetheart."

My eyes followed him as he reached for the towel hanging over the handle of the oven to dry his hands. Seeing the time on the display, I realised Edel and Amir really would be here any minute. I peered over anxiously at the open doors to the dining room, where I could see the table I had laid out with place settings and candles that flickered softly.

Then my gaze shifted over to the hallway, even though I couldn't see the cellar door from here. My belly clenched with nerves. It was padlocked, the only key with Theo, and I never saw any traces of what happened down there, but… still. We were about to entertain guests—our friends—in the house that Theo killed people in.

"Doesn't it worry you?" I heard myself asking in a mumble, nodding at the door when he glanced over with a slight frown. "Having people here when…"

He relaxed, coming to stand behind me and wrapping his arms around my middle when I straightened.

"No. They'd never see anything. The police scoured every inch of this place when they came here a few years ago. Dusted for prints. Looked for blood. They went into the cellar. Into that room." I felt him shrug. "Nothing. No one will ever find anything."

When I glanced up at him over my shoulder, he was already watching me.

"There's nothing to find once He's done with them," he said simply.

I swallowed and nodded, then jumped when the doorbell rang. I'd been so distracted that I hadn't even heard a car pull onto the drive. Giving the top of my head a kiss, Theo released me so I could go answer the door.

Athena had already raced into the front hall by the time I made it out of the kitchen, and was barking excitedly at the door, her tail wagging manically.

"Calm down." I chuckled as I tugged it open, the big wreath on the outside swaying softly and prickly cold air rushing into the warm house.

"*Hallo*!" Edel grinned cheerfully, bundled up in a coat and scarf, a beanie shoved over their braids. "*Ach*, let us in, *Engel*, it's freezing out here."

Amir was crunching up the drive from the car holding a bottle of wine, and he stopped to greet Athena as she shot out to meet him.

"Your tree looks so nice!" Edel exclaimed, stepping inside as I held open the door to wait for Amir. "It's so big. And impeccably decorated,"

they added teasingly as they unwound their scarf. “Just like the one you used to do every year at the flat.”

“Well, you’ve got all those decorations now,” I pointed out. “You can make it look just as nice as I did.”

Amir and his brother had cleared out our old flat completely before the lease ended. I’d opted to throw most of my old furniture out. I didn’t need it anymore, and a lot of it had been at least somewhat water-damaged. I’d told Edel and Amir they could keep anything else worth having for their new home together.

Theo had told me what the demon had done. He’d been wracked with guilt over it, but I calmly told him it was fine. It wasn’t his fault, and it wasn’t like He had been trying to hurt me. I suspected He thought He’d been doing a kind thing for Theo.

Edel snorted. “No, I can’t. Especially not with *that* one’s help,” they joked, jerking their thumb at Amir as he finally stepped inside with a big beaming smile.

“Alright, Ari?” He passed me the bottle of wine and kissed my cheek. “Where’s the master chef?”

I laughed, ushering Athena back inside so I could close the door. “In the kitchen.”

Once they’d both taken off their coats, I took them through to greet Theo. He smiled, kissing Edel’s cheek and shaking Amir’s hand before asking what they both wanted to drink. He politely thanked them for the bottle of wine when I handed it to him, before wandering off to find a bottle opener.

“We’re eating in here tonight,” I said as I led them to the dining room.

“No poolside winter dining and brisk after-dinner swim to digest our food?” Edel joked, looking around when we stepped inside. “Okay, definitely not. It’s so nice and warm in here.”

As Amir wandered back into the kitchen to chat with Theo, Edel’s head cocked when they noticed the framed photos lining the far wall. My mouth tipped up into a secret smile as they headed over to take a closer look.

Theo had shown me the trunk in his office a while back, filled with the remnants of his long life. An album bound in leather, wrapped in soft cloth and filled with loose, crumbling sheets of paper that he had carefully flattened and protected. They were recipes that his mother had written out when he was a boy, indecipherable to me as they were written in French,

but her handwriting was so loopy and slanted that it was hard to even make out letters.

He had told me that his mother died of consumption when he was fifteen. So had his father and two younger brothers—all of them in quick succession, leaving him all alone in the world, still just a young boy.

It was what had made him stop caring about anyone else. About anything at all for a while. And he had grown terrified that what had killed his family was lurking in him, just waiting to kill him as painfully as it had killed his parents and siblings. He'd watched them succumb, trying to help, but nothing could help once they'd started coughing up blood, shivering in their beds soaked in sweat, so tired they couldn't move and delirious with fever.

He had become terrified of death. And so he'd started trying to find a way to escape it.

In the trunk, there was the dagger he had used to summon the demon, the blade tarnished and the wooden handle plain. He didn't tell me exactly what the ritual had entailed, and I didn't ask.

There were also bundles of old photographs and portraits, which I'd teased him about. But several of them I'd framed and got him to hang up on the wall in here. I wanted to see them. I liked looking over the journey of his life that had led him to find me.

"Wow, this looks *so* much like Theo," Edel exclaimed. Clearing my throat, I walked over to peer at the photograph they were looking at.

Yellow-tinged and crumbling at the edges, it showed Theo standing alone against a backdrop of sprawling prairie. His face was sombre, unsmiling, free of any piercings and his beard a plain black. There was a kerchief around his neck above an old cotton shirt, a wide-brimmed hat on his head, and a rifle resting on his shoulder, long fingers loosely clasping the trigger in an easy grip.

"It looks like the old west," Edel mused, then glanced at me. "I thought Theo was French."

"He is," I said quickly. "But, um, I think some of his family emigrated to the States."

"Ah, I see. How cool that he has these old photographs of them!" They moved to the next one and snorted with laughter. "Bluebeard's family has strong genes, *ja?* This guy looks exactly like him too."

I smiled and stepped over. This photo was a portrait shot of Theo from Victorian London, his hair short and neatly combed, his face clean-shaven except for a thick, curling moustache. He was wearing a high-collared shirt with a cravat under a grey wool three-piece suit. Even though he was unsmiling again, he looked so handsome that my throat ached as I stared at the photograph.

Glancing over slyly at Edel, I lifted a hand and pressed a fingertip to the glass. “Do you see that?”

They squinted their eyes, leaning in closer.

“What am I meant to be looking for?” they asked, even as they peered directly at the shadowy mass in the corner of the photograph. “It’s just a plain background.”

Except it wasn’t. Just behind Theo’s head, looming over him, was a black, hazy shape with proud, smoky horns curling into the air. A wispy clawed hand resting on Theo’s shoulder. Pinprick white pupils, staring directly into the lens.

He was in every photo. Every picture of Theo, always with him. Always touching him in some way.

Including the photo at the very end of the wall—the one we had taken just weeks ago while out picking pumpkins from a nearby farm for Halloween. A mother out doing the same with her two kids had offered to take it for us on my phone.

In it, I was beaming at the camera, clutching a fat orange pumpkin in my arms, my cheeks flushed with happiness, tendrils of blond hair sneaking out from under the edge of my beanie. Theo had his arm around my shoulders, and he was gazing down at me with an expression filled with so much love that my throat closed up every time I looked at it.

We were slightly off-centre in the photo, almost as if the woman taking it had been able to tell that He was there. Because standing beside Theo was that black shadow, tall and hulking. A dark blot marring the bright blue autumn sky and field dotted with orange behind us.

Theo’s demon. My demon now too. He was ours.

White pupils reflected the sun as He gazed at His vessel and His vessel gazed at me. I could see Him clearly, but I knew no one else could, other than Theo. Shadowy horns and the blurry haze of sharp teeth. A wide chest tapering into unnaturally bent legs, ending with cloven hooves that bled black into the earth.

And His smoky fingers, tipped with sharp talons, curling lovingly around Theo’s dangling hand.

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About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

Get in touch with Lily at authorlilymayne@gmail.com

Follow Lily's author page on Facebook to keep up to date with her work:
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